



European Bureau for Conscientious Objection

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EBCO PRESS RELEASE

WAR IN EUROPE: WHAT IS HAPPENING TO CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTORS?

Publication of EBCO Annual Report "Conscientious Objection to Military Service in Europe 2023/24" on May 15th, international conscientious objection day

Brussels, 14 May 2024

The [European Bureau for Conscientious Objection \(EBCO\)](http://www.ebco-beoc.org) announces its forthcoming publication of its Annual Report "Conscientious Objection to Military Service in Europe 2023/24" on May 15th, international conscientious objection day. It will be available online on 15 May 2024 on the EBCO website (www.ebco-beoc.org). It was also presented in a Press Conference on May 10th in the Peace House in Brussels. Panel:

- **Derek Brett**, Chief Editor of the [European Bureau for Conscientious Objection \(EBCO\)](http://www.ebco-beoc.org) (in person)
- **Saša Belik**, Director of the [Movement of Conscientious Objectors to military service in Russia](http://www.ebco-beoc.org) (in person)
- **Yurii Sheliashenko**, Executive Secretary of the [Ukrainian Pacifist Movement](http://www.ebco-beoc.org) (online)
- **Olga Karatch**, Director of the [Belarusian organisation "Our House"](http://www.ebco-beoc.org) (in person)

Moderator: **Sam Biesemans**, EBCO Vice-President.

All the presentations, as well as the video recording of the press conference (by Mirko Popovitch) **and photos** (by Jan Van Criekeing and Sam Biesemans), **are now available on the EBCO website** (www.ebco-beoc.org/node/623).

For the second year, this report is necessarily dominated by the **war in Ukraine**, with a large part of the space being taken up with reports of developments in **Ukraine, Russia and Belarus** and the situation of refugees from these countries. EBCO continues working on the **#ObjectWarCampaign**, which was jointly launched by [Connection e.V.](http://www.ebco-beoc.org), [War Resisters' International \(WRI\)](http://www.ebco-beoc.org), [International Fellowship of Reconciliation \(IFOR\)](http://www.ebco-beoc.org), and [European Bureau for Conscientious Objection \(EBCO\)](http://www.ebco-beoc.org).

This Annual Report covers developments from 2023 up to the start of April 2024. It might seem surprising that we do not report on the conflict in **Gaza** since October 2023 and the war crimes which have dominated the world's attention. EBCO of course stands in solidarity with **Israeli conscientious objectors** and all victims of this armed conflict, and EBCO members have held and participated in a number of activities in support of the Israeli conscientious objectors and the non-violent activists from both sides for a just peace. Nevertheless, Israel/Palestine does not fall within the Council of Europe region, so has no place in this report.

Likewise, a number of conflicts continue elsewhere - **Sudan, Ethiopia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Myanmar** - with as great or even greater death tolls, but receive much less attention, but these too lie outside our mandate.

Within Europe, the clouds of war are gathering. It is not just in the belligerent countries, and Belarus which seems poised to join directly in support of Russia; elsewhere there is talk of preparedness for war, of increasing military spending, recruitment (e.g. Denmark), of bringing

back conscription (e.g. Latvia) or extending it to women. The very right of conscientious objection to military service is coming under threat.

Last year we reported on the case of **Tetlianikov v Lithuania** in which the **European Court of Human Rights** found that the alternative service which had been made available since the reinstatement of conscription in 2014 was in effect unarmed military service; in other countries, too, notably **Latvia** and **Sweden**, and under proposals which keep being revived in **Switzerland**, there is talk of integrating alternative service for conscientious objectors more closely with civil defence, and thus into the system of national preparedness for war. Programmes of military training within the secondary school system are being introduced and expanded, usually with no provision for conscientious objection. So those are voluntary - or in the case of **France**, potentially compulsory programmes for youth which prepare for and encourage military recruitment (Service National Universel).

The whole justification for conscientious objection in time of peace is that the *raison d'être* of armed forces is to prepare for war. It is therefore paradoxical that as war looms, the right of conscientious objection should come under threat. With a view to the actual and potential risks in this regard, we introduce in this year's report an important new section on "**Conscientious objection in time of war or other national emergency**".

To an extent far greater than ever before, we have to report the **harassment of EBCO members and contributors to this report for their work associated with EBCO**. In **Ukraine**, **Yurii Sheliashenko**, Executive Secretary of the **Ukrainian Pacifist Movement** and EBCO Board member, has been placed under continually-extended house arrest and suffered the seizure of his computer and smartphone while investigated by the state security service, seemingly on ridiculous charges of "justifying Russian aggression", and the Ministry of Justice of Ukraine initiated prohibition of the Ukrainian Pacifist Movement. In **Russia**, the **Movement of Conscientious Objectors to military service in Russia** and its Director EBCO Board member **Saša Belik**, have been declared a "foreign agent", severely hampering their ability to raise funds and to operate in support of conscientious objectors. And **Olga Karatch**, Director of the Belarusian organisation "**Our House**" and EBCO Board member, who already faces long imprisonment should she return to Belarus on charges springing from her overt anti-regime activism, is finding her sanctuary in Lithuania threatened by the authorities' refusal to grant her asylum, seemingly because of her tireless advocacy for Belarusians fleeing the possibility of military mobilisation.

Amid these new and growing threats, we must also not forget the continuing denial of the right of conscientious objection to military service in **Azerbaijan** and **Türkiye**, where those who have not performed military service continue to live in an indefinite state of civil death.

However, let us end on a positive note with our report of yet another **European Court of Human Rights** judgement in a conscientious objection case against **Türkiye**, this time for the activities of the self-styled "**Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus**", which also denies the right of conscientious objection in a case concerning **Murat Kanatli**, EBCO Board member and Co-coordinator of the **Initiative for Conscientious Objection in Cyprus**. This is a case which broke new grounds in international jurisprudence, firmly confirming that the right of conscientious objection to military service applies equally to reserve mobilisation as to first-time call-up.

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The [European Bureau for Conscientious Objection \(EBCO\)](#) 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 to European and international institutions. EBCO publishes its annual report "Conscientious Objection to Military Service in Europe" which is also EBCO's contribution to 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.