

European Bureau for Conscientious Objection

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

A negative track across Europe

Launch of EBCO's Annual Report 2017 on Conscientious Objection to Military Service in Europe

Brussels, 8 December 2017

In view of the International Human Rights Day (December 10th) the European Bureau for Conscientious Objection (EBCO) publishes its new Annual Report "Conscientious Objection to Military Service in Europe 2017".

"In 2017 efforts to recognize the rights of conscientious objectors to military service have taken once more a negative track in Europe", EBCO President Friedhelm Schneider stated today. "Apparently the predominant concerns of EU politics were less marked by the promotion of human rights than by economic planning and by the intention to strengthen military cooperation and spending. It is self-evident that a context of progressing militarization does not facilitate the implementation of the fundamental right of conscientious objection to military service. Correspondingly in 2017 the item of conscientious objection did not figure on the political agenda of European institutions – even though massive and repeated violations of this right continue to be deplored."

Derek Brett, co-author of the report, presents its key findings:

"Sadly, we have many reports of the continued violation of the rights of conscientious objectors, both in Europe and in countries beyond from which conscientious objectors flee to Europe seeking asylum.

Almost twelve years ago, in a ground-breaking decision, the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) first condemned the persecution of a conscientious objector in its judgement in the case of Ulke v Turkey. Not only has Turkey never implemented that judgement; in November 2017, Osman Murat Ulke himself was summoned to make a statement and discovered that in flat defiance of the ECtHR, the original case against him, dating back to the 1990s, had been reopened.

In Greece, too, a prosecution was launched against Panagiotis Makris for his refusal of military service, dating back to 1990.

Russia has moved to criminalise membership of the Jehovah's Witnesses, who hitherto provided most of those admitted to alternative civilian service.

In Switzerland, too, proposals are being discussed with the explicit aim of making civilian service less attractive; proposals which if accepted would move directly away from best practice.

The growing number of states which are discussing the reintroduction of conscription is a particularly worrying trend, even though for the moment many of the schemes are self-contradictorily described as voluntary. It is ironic that at the same time other states should be trying to pass of as volunteers those who accept the option to perform their obligatory military service below the minimum age.

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.

Eighteen years after the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict, it is disgraceful that the recruitment of persons under 18 has not yet been eliminated in Europe.

It is however not all gloom. Although there is some room for improvement, a growing number of conscientious objectors to military service are being granted asylum, or at least protected status. And there is encouraging talk of improved legislative provisions in Greece, and of possible provision for conscientious objectors in the Turkish-occupied northern part of Cyprus, something which for the moment could not be dreamed of in Turkey itself."

Looking back to our enduring sources of inspiration, Friedhelm Schneider, EBCO President, pays tribute in the foreword of the Report to Simone Veil, who passed away on 30th June 2017. *"It was thanks to the persuasive advocacy of Simone Veil that on 7th February 1983 the European Parliament adopted with clear majority its first comprehensive resolution on conscientious objection. In the preceding controversial debate Veil argued against a contribution stating that conscientious objection regards only persons at the margins of society. In this context she underlined that conscientious objection to military service has to be affirmed in the framework of human rights as a right appearing more and more as one of the essential rights of the individual. "*

Martina Lucia Lanza, co-author of the Report and EBCO's delegate to the European Youth Forum, said *"Young people all over Europe should be united against compulsory military service and demand from their governments to invest in education, research, employment, health and culture, rather than conscription and military"*.

EBCO urges the member states of the Council of Europe which still do not respect the human right of conscientious objection to military service to bring their legislation and practice in line with European and international human right standards.

The comprehensive Report on Conscientious Objection to Military Service in Europe 2017 can be downloaded from EBCO's website: www.ebco-beoc.org/

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