

European Bureau for Conscientious Objection

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Torture, detention and denial of alternative service: EBCO calls on Ukraine to uphold the right to conscientious objection

The European Bureau for Conscientious Objection (EBCO) condemns the torture and death in military custody of Ukrainian conscientious objector Dmytro Koval and calls on Ukraine to immediately end the persecution, arbitrary detention and ill-treatment of conscientious objectors, adopt legislation guaranteeing alternative civilian service in wartime, and ensure accountability for all abuses committed during mobilisation.

We are deeply concerned by a [recent report](#) of Ukrainian media about torturing to death a conscientious objector Dmytro Koval and other individuals, at least 26 in total, at Skelya assault regiment. Welcoming the announced start of official investigation, we emphasize that it is not enough to ensure accountability of perpetrators responsible for torture of conscientious objectors in [this and other cases](#). Ukraine must prevent repetition of such incidents by changing current policy of attempts to violently force individuals to change their religion of belief incompatible with service in Armed Forces of Ukraine, contrary to Articles 7 and 18 (2) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights that should be fully respected in time of war and cannot be derogated.

We regret that Ukraine did not respect a commitment of the *Rule of Law Roadmap* to adopt law providing for alternative nonmilitary service in wartime in the second quarter of 2026, and that commitment itself was restricted only to protection of religiously motivated conscientious objectors discriminating non-religious pacifists. We are concerned that the inaccurate draft law discussed at the closed-doors meeting of officials without civil society under the title “Discussion of expediency of introducing a mechanism of conducting alternative (nonmilitary) service in conditions of martial law” in the Office of President of Ukraine on 17 February 2026 was restrictive and discriminatory, not compliant with international standards, and in the end even in this crippled form did not reach a stage of approval by the Government, not to say adoption by the Parliament. Even more concerning was a reason given for non-compliance with the obligations, namely: the Ministry of Defense and the General Staff “categorically insist” on conducting “alternative” service at non-combatant positions in Armed Forces of Ukraine. [This position](#) deeply contradicts religious beliefs of a significant number of Ukrainian conscientious objectors.

More than a hundred conscientious objectors were detained by court decisions last year, and thousands are forcibly held in military units. Punishments for conscientious objection, arbitrary detentions and violence were reported by the UN, CoE and Ukrainian Parliamentary Human Rights Commissioners, by the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine and other human rights bodies.

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As also documented in our [Annual report](#), these violations must also be read in the broader context of the shrinking civic space for pacifist and antiwar voices in Ukraine, including the unlawful persecution targeting Yurii Sheliazhenko, Executive Secretary of the Ukrainian Pacifist Movement. Being forcibly conscripted and tortured himself for holding Quaker faith, [Yurii proposed several reforms](#) that need to be seriously considered by Ukrainian government, such as requiring conscription offices to provide phones so detainees can contact relatives or a lawyer, and displaying information on detainees' rights, including the right to conscientious objection. His case shows that the repression of conscientious objection is not limited to individual refusal of military service, but also affects those who document violations, promote nonviolence, and advocate for the right to live according to conscience.

In the [2025 report of the European Commission](#), it is emphasized that Ukraine needs to establish safeguards protecting individuals from criminal prosecution in case of conscientious objection taking into account the amicus curiae brief of the Venice Commission of March 2025. In the [Memorandum on human rights elements for peace in Ukraine](#), Michael O'Flaherty, Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, recommended that Ukraine uphold international standards on conscientious objection, summarised by the Venice Commission, and insisted the Ukrainian authorities should put in place a mechanism to prevent human rights violations during mobilisation. We welcome the opening of [first accession negotiations](#) cluster between EU and Ukraine and hope that EU common position, which underlines the need to strengthen alignment of Ukraine's legal and institutional framework with the EU acquis and European standards on fundamental rights, will help in the course of negotiations.

EBCO calls on Ukraine to:

- immediately stop arbitrary detention, torture and ill-treatment of conscientious objectors;
- release imprisoned conscientious objectors and prisoners of conscience;
- adopt legislation guaranteeing genuinely civilian alternative service during wartime in accordance with international standards;
- fully implement recommendations of the [Venice Commission](#), UN human rights mechanisms and Council of Europe bodies.

EBCO calls on the European Union to:

- ensure that accession negotiations with Ukraine include scrutiny of compliance with international standards on conscientious objection;
- guarantee access to asylum and humanitarian protection for conscientious objectors facing persecution;
- urge to withdraw the [recent proposal of European Commission](#) not to grant humanitarian protection “to newly arriving persons who are not authorised by the Ukrainian authorities to leave Ukraine in view of their military obligations”

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