



European Bureau for Conscientious Objection

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The Greek government of SYRIZA should honor its promises about reduction of the length of alternative civilian service

*Open letter of the European Bureau for Conscientious Objection (EBCO)
to the Alternate Minister of National Defence of Greece*

To: Alternate Minister of National Defence of Greece, Mr. Panagiotis Rigas

CC:

- UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Mr. Ahmed Shaheed
- Mr. Christos Karagiannidis, MP

Dear Mr. Rigas,

As it has been pointed out [in advance by EBCO](#), the recent law 4609/2019 introduced only minor changes to the relevant legislation, and failed to bring the Greek legislation about conscientious objectors in line with the international human rights law and standards. As for the specific aspect of the length, as it has been pointed out also by other NGOs including Amnesty International,¹ as well as official institutions, such as the Greek National Commission for Human Rights,² the new law did not guarantee any reduction in the actual length of alternative service, as it only extended the discretionary power of the Minister of National Defence to reduce it further than the previous lower limit.

Currently, the actual length remains the same as it was before the law 4609/2019: for those due to perform full service, the length of alternative civilian service is still 15 months. Therefore, compared to 9 months of military service for the vast majority of conscripts serving in the Army, the length of alternative civilian service remains punitive and discriminatory, as it has been

¹ Amnesty International, "Greece: Observations on the right to conscientious objection - "serious violations of Greece's obligations towards conscientious objectors remain unaddressed in proposed bill despite some positive steps"", 20 March 2019, available at <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur25/0088/2019/en/>

² (in Greek) [Παρατηρήσεις](#) επί των άρθρων 18, 21 και 22 του Σχεδίου Νόμου του Υπουργείου Εθνικής Άμυνας "Ρυθμίσεις Μέριμνας Προσωπικού Ενόπλων Δυνάμεων, Στρατολογίας, Στρατιωτικής Δικαιοσύνης και άλλες διατάξεις" (Αντιρρησίες Συνείδησης), 19.3.2019.

previously pointed out, *inter alia*, by the UN Human Rights Committee³ and consequently by the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief.⁴

During the period of discussion of the bill, **both the Alternate Minister of National Defence,⁵ as well as the rapporteur of the bill of the governing SYRIZA party⁶ have stated that the length of (full) alternative service will be reduced by 3 months, from 15 to 12 months.**

Worth noting that such a reduction would mean that the length of alternative service would still be 3 months longer than the length of military service for the vast majority of conscripts and thus punitive as it would fail to comply with repeated resolutions of the European Parliament, both in general⁷ and specifically in the case of Greece,⁸ that the length of alternative civilian should be of the *same* length as military service. But it would certainly be an important step towards the right direction.

However, a month and a half has passed since the publication of the law 4609/2019 at Government's Gazette (A 67) and there has been no such ministerial decision to reduce the length of alternative civilian service.

In view of the imminent end of the current term of the government of SYRIZA, the European Bureau for Conscientious Objection urges the Alternate Minister of National Defence of Greece, Mr. Panagiotis Rigas and the government in general to **honor their promises about reduction of the length of alternative civilian service to 12 months for full service**, and equivalently for the categories of reduced service, as a step towards respecting international law.

Yours sincerely



Friedhelm Schneider
President of the European Bureau for Conscientious Objection

³ UN Human Rights Committee, *Concluding observations on the second periodic report of Greece*, 3.12.2015, CCPR/C/GRC/CO/2, paras. 37-38. Available at: <https://undocs.org/CCPR/C/GRC/CO/2>

⁴ UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, *Communication GRC 3/2016*, 31.10.2016. Available at: <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gId=22834>

⁵ E.g. Interview of the Alternate Minister of National Defence to the Radio Station "Agency 104,9 FM" of the Athens News Agency – Macedonian News Agency, as reported by Avgi newspaper, 13 March 2019.

<http://www.avgi.gr/article/10845/9674950/p-regas-me-koinoniko-prosemo-to-n-s-gia-to-prosopiko-ton-enoplion-dynameon>
⁶ Second speech of the Rapporteur of the SYRIZA party for the relevant bill, Mr. Christos Karagiannidis, [Session of 18 April 2019](#).

⁷ European Parliament, Resolution on respect for human rights in the European Community (annual report of the European Parliament), (A3-0025/93), 11 March 1993, para. 51, as it has been published in the Official Journal of the European Communities C 115, 26 April 1993, [Minutes of the sitting of Thursday, 11 March 1993](#), page 183. Resolution on conscientious objection in the Member States of the Community, (A3-0411/93), 19 January 1994, para. 9, as it has been published in the Official Journal of the European Communities C 44, 14 February 1994, [Minutes of the sitting of Wednesday, 19 January 1994](#), page 105.

⁸ Resolution on the situation concerning basic rights in the European Union (2001) (2001/2014(INI)), para 42, text adopted on 15 January 2003, available at <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+TA+P5-TA-2003-0012+0+DOC+XML+V0//EN>

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.