

**Olga Karach:** We are living in a very strange situation right now. Everyone talks about peace and security but in reality there is less and less peace and security today. Everyone talks about women's rights and feminism and about how important it is to involve in peace-building processes but in fact women are extremely excluded from these processes. Everyone talks about environmental issues and climate change but there is less and less real action on climate and environmental protection.

Talking about peace and discussing peace issues has become toxic and peace-builders are being attacked and falsely accused. Conferences are cancelled or under the threat of being cancelled, stripped of funding or venue. We already have to protect those activists who are in Germany, Austria and other western countries. What about us activists from Eastern Europe? I am very confused because now I feel like I am in Belarus. Or, all of Europe has become one big Belarus, some places more so, some places less so. What the hell is going on?

The Russian politician Alexej Navalny was murdered in a Russian prison today. There are a lot of reactions in the press today, statements, calls for sanctions and loud speeches by different politicians. But how many more invisible political prisoners in Belarus and Russia will die in prison, just because no one is working on the prevention of any political crisis in these countries and other countries, too. All diplomatic work, as I heard yesterday from the Lithuanian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Gabrielius Landsbergis, has been reduced to saying that we are ready for the war. I always hear everywhere that we are ready for the war and for the next war after that. This is what I hear all the time, I want to repeat. But I don't hear what I want to hear much more: We are ready for peace.

No one speaks about that. We cannot even imagine peace after the war in Ukraine. Western countries have become afraid of discussions and this is what Alexanders Lukashenko has built his power on: the willingness of people to live under censorship and within a society without any discussions. When the war was started, I went around to all the Lithuanian and Polish politicians and begged them: please help Belarusian and Russian conscientious objectors. Please help Belarus to not enter the war. But all I heard from them was that they cannot help me because among conscientious objectors there might Russian or belarusian spies. Really? Seriously?

Today, we are all afraid to read the news. Because all we read in the news is about the war. Who has been killed, how many were wounded, the amount of weapons arriving in Ukraine and what is still needed. We are starting to speak in military terms and do not even notice it. Children are playing war and it no longer seems horrifying to us. We get used to living under the war and the life of a person costs nothing. Everything has been turned upside down. Today, those who refuse to take up arms and do not want to go to the front, conscientious objectors and deserters, have become criminals. Today, if you do not want to take up arms, you are not a real man. There is something wrong with you. You must be punished.

We help conscientious objectors and deserters but this is very challenging now. They are not welcome anywhere. In Belarus, desertion is punishable by the death penalty and refusal to join the military results in imprisonment. In 2022, around 400 men in Belarus were convicted for refusal to join the army. At present, the Belarusian police has declared approximately 5000 Belarusian men wanted for attempting to evade military service in Russia or the European Union. But no one provides protection for these individuals. No one provides protection to the Belarusian and Russian conscientious objectors. They have no legal status and do not get humanitarian visas.

On the contrary, if a man was previously in the army and did everything in his power to avoid future conscription, including hiding in Lithuania, he is considered as a threat to national security in Lithuania and is blacklisted with a five-year entry ban into the European Union. Very often, such men, Belarusian conscientious objectors, are deported back to Belarusian prisons. We help these people, for which we ourselves face pressure and repression.

But, today, I want to say: No to war! Helping conscientious objectors costs less than any armament — but for some reason, no one does it. There is no way for Putin and Lukashenko to be involved in war without soldiers. But they will have soldiers. There will be soldiers, as a result of desperation and hopelessness, while only a few help to save conscientious objectors and deserters from the military. We want to preserve human life. The simplest approach is to insure that those, who do not want to take part in the army are not forced to do so. We have to protect their lives and the lives of people who may be killed in war.

Let us help deserters and conscientious objectors together. Let us stop the war through humane and non-violent means. Let us save those who have not been killed yet. Children, women and the elderly. Let us save them before it is too late. Let us finally talk about peace, read news about peace and take military toys away from our children. Because war is not a game, not for children and not for adults. We need peace, here and now.

**Audience member:** Can you tell us something about the situation of deserters in Ukraine?

**Olga:** Thank you for this important question. Actually, all conscientious objectors and deserters from Belarus, Russia and Ukraine have the same problem: they are not welcome anywhere. Concerning Ukrainian deserters and conscientious objectors, there are discussions, especially in Baltic countries, about how to deport them back to Ukraine to feed the war. So it is a similar situation in these three countries and that is why we started the “object war” campaign to help deserters and conscientious objectors from all of these three countries together.

**Julian Mühlfellner (Moderation):** How did you find the courage to oppose the regime in Belarus?

**Olga:** I believe in people power. I believe that we can build a democracy only from below. And I believe we can stop the war only through the demand of the people. Putin and Lukashenko cannot continue the war if the people, who are forced to be involved in the war can avoid participating in it through our help. This is a really big challenge right now, to organize the infrastructure to help people evade participation in the war. But I don't believe that we can stop the war without taking account of people's wishes.

**Audience member:** I would like to know how the help is organized.

**Olga:** First of all, we organise a hotline for conscientious objectors. Then, we help them to leave the country, move to the European Union and try to arrange a legal status that allows them to stay and be protected. Right now, when they arrive here, especially deserters, they receive no legal status. We need your help in organizing some kind of advocacy campaign or pressure campaign for your politicians to provide a legal status for deserters and conscientious objectors in Germany and other countries. Because now, in Lithuania for example, it is impossible for conscientious objectors to receive any kind of legal status and they cannot stay in the EU, if they arrive in Lithuania. Also, what is important and of great help to us is the distribution of information about conscientious objectors and violations against their rights in social (media) networks. I do not hear a lot of news about Belarus or about the situation of conscientious objectors and this is what we can do together: distribute the news everywhere, including to journalists and social media — and involve people and prove to them that they can help conscientious objectors as a way to stop the war.

**Audience member:** How many people are we talking about? What is the percentage of those who are, due to conscription, conscientious objectors? And how many would there be if they could object without having to hear repressions?

**Olga:** That is a great question, for which I will have to provide some background: unfortunately, we are hearing some alarming calls, especially from Russian propaganda, that Belarusians will have to participate in the war, too. We expect the mass mobilisation of Belarusian soldiers after the present elections in Russia. This is very alarming to us and we have to hurry to stop this process. Speaking about Belarusians and the number of potential conscientious objectors, that is about 10.000 people. That is enough to stop any participation of the Belarusian army in the war. Of course, if we are speaking about Russian conscientious objectors, the number is bigger, even if it is unclear how big. In my opinion, these people should be able to move to Baltic countries, but of course, they are not welcome there. I don't know, but maybe the potential in Russia is around 100.000 people. About Ukrainians, unfortunately, we have no information, but we know that in Germany you already have around 200.000 men who do not want to participate in the war. So this is in my opinion

a huge number of people. On the other hand, if you compare it with Poland, for example, which accepted more than 4 million refugees, it is not so big. If this is the price to stop the war we have to do it.