



Quaker
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A watercolor illustration on a light pink background. In the background, four blue-tinted silhouettes of soldiers in full combat gear are saluting. In the foreground, a family of four is walking away from the viewer. The family consists of a woman in a red hijab, a young girl in a red dress, a young boy in a red shirt, and a man in a red suit. The family is holding hands and walking towards the right.

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Team changes

Farewell to Xavier, hello to Monica!

Dear Friends,

This year began with an important team change. Our long-standing Office Manager, Xavier Verhaeghe, has decided to step back into semi-retirement to focus on his passion for working as a tourist guide. He will, however, continue to serve as our Property Manager, so you'll still see him at Quaker House Brussels. He has been the longest-serving member of our staff, helping us in a variety of roles over more than twenty years.

We are delighted to welcome his successor, Monica Espinoza. Monica is a fasciatherapist and has previously worked with the American Friends

Service Committee. Monica is a member of Belgium Luxembourg Yearly Meeting. We look forward to collaborating with her and are excited about the fresh ideas she will bring to the team.

To read Xavier's farewell message, turn to page 11, where he reflects on his decades-long journey with QCEA. Thank you, Xavier, for everything!

Andrew de Sousa, QCEA Director

Monica Espinoza

A new QCEA Office Manager



Conscription's return to Europe

Across Europe, compulsory military service is re-emerging as a central feature in national security planning. After three decades in which many states reduced or abolished conscription, Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine has changed the situation dramatically.

Several EU member states continue to rely on some form of compulsory service, while others are now reconsidering it in light of shifting security concerns. Countries such as Austria, Croatia, Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Greece, Latvia, Lithuania, and Sweden have retained or reinstated conscription over the past decades.

Starting in January this year, young men in Croatia were called to participate in a two-month-long military training. Poland has announced plans for broad military training for adult men. Germany and Belgium have opted for voluntary national service schemes that could be the first step towards reinstating full conscription. Meanwhile, Bulgaria and Romania have introduced short-term voluntary programmes aimed at attracting younger citizens into defence structures.

This renewed interest in conscription is not without challenges. Modern armed forces rely heavily on advanced technology, requiring extensive training and logistical support. A larger intake of recruits does not automatically translate into a more capable military. Critics warn that rushed expansion risks creating under-prepared forces, while supporters argue that Europe must be ready to defend itself, and that it requires citizens to share responsibility. However, what is our perspective?

Our perspective

From QCEA's standpoint, this moment calls for a clear commitment to civil rather than military security. The war in Ukraine has intensified political pressure to expand armed forces, often amplifying the influence of the defence industry and fear-driven narratives. We have seen that the EU has been very successful in dealing with conflicts through diplomacy, mediation and peacebuilding programmes, while military build-ups can create generational security problems such as the proliferation of small arms, traumatised veterans, environmental degradation and de-funding of social safety nets. We believe Europe's response must instead address the underlying causes of conflict and prioritise approaches that uphold human dignity, cooperation and long-term peace.

What we are doing?

QCEA continues to hold conscientious objectors in the light, amplify their stories, defend their rights and create spaces for dialogue on non-military pathways to security. Some of the ways we do this are through events, partnerships and research that explore practical civil alternatives to conscription.

How EU 'simplification' of laws risks feeding the global arms race and nuclear weaponry

In our previous [Around Europe](#), we mentioned the 'simplification' packages through which the European Commission is proposing to reduce EU regulatory requirements, arguing this will improve the global competitiveness of European industry.

The arms industry sector is no exception. It benefited from its own deregulation packages: the so-called 'mini-omnibus' in April and a larger package in June 2025. These packages were made up of eight separate texts dealing with different defence-specific or civil legislative frameworks. Furthermore, these major political choices are being made through accelerated decision-making processes. This makes it very difficult for independent observers to understand exactly what is being proposed, but it could have major implications on arms export controls and human security. We have found three aspects to be particularly concerning:

- These packages amend the definition of controversial weapons, limiting it to "weapons prohibited by international arms conventions to which the majority of Member States are party." This will only include four categories of prohibited weapons: anti-personnel mines, cluster munitions, chemical weapons, and biological weapons. This change aims at putting pressure on sustainable finance actors to consider any other type of weaponry or military technology as a possible sustainable investment, such as nuclear weapons or new technologies that are radically changing the conduct of war, from laser and hypersonic technologies to unmanned and autonomous weapons.

- Environmental, health and safety are not given full consideration in the development and production of military products: EU civilian funds are directed towards military industry and technologies; national permitting processes for military industrial projects are accelerated to the point of making any proper impact assessment impossible; and the arms industry is given broadened exemptions in a range of European laws including REACH (regulating the use of chemicals), Environmental Impact Assessments, Restriction on Hazardous Substances, Biocidal Products, and Persistent Organic Pollutants.
- 'Intra-EU transfers,' i.e., selling arms from one EU country to another, is also problematic. [As ENAAT explains in detail](#), export controls designed to keep European weapons out of the world's most volatile conflict zones are being dismantled by extending exceptions from licensing, favouring 'General Transfer Licenses' which allow for unlimited transfers of military equipment, and increasing the scope of self-monitoring rather than independence scrutiny of arms manufacturers. These measures take away state control, although it is the states who are accountable to EU and international law, in particular the EU common position on arms exports and the Arms Trade Treaty.

The cost of this "simplification" will not be measured in economic growth but in the human suffering caused by European weapons in tomorrow's conflict zones.

Want to know more?

Visit [European Network Against the Arms Trade's new website](https://enaat.org/) (<https://enaat.org/>).

MFF update

An interview with Aurélie Buytaert (EPLO)

Deliberations have been ongoing for the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), the 2028-2034 budget for the European Union. The Commission presented its initial proposal in July 2025. A complicated negotiation process is now underway between the Commission, the European Parliament and Member States aiming to reach an agreement on the MFF by the end of this year. QCEA spoke with Aurélie Buytaert from the European Peacebuilding Liaison Office (EPLO), who has been following the MFF developments closely in Brussels.

QCEA: Half a year ago, many observers expressed serious concerns over the Commission's initial proposal, with significant increases in military spending and 'simplifying' the budget to weaken long-term policy goals like gender equality, environmental protection and social cohesion. Has anything happened since then to give you hope that the final 2028-2034 MFF will be better than what was first proposed?

AB: Yes, attention for fragility has gained traction. This is due to some Member States, like Belgium and Ireland, and some MEPs also championing the issue. It could shift the attention back toward conflict prevention and peacebuilding. But much remains to be done: for instance, this needs to encompass all highly fragile states, not just extremely fragile states as is suggested at the moment.

QCEA: EPLO has called for the Global Pillar in the Global Europe programme to be allocated at least €15 billion in the next MFF. Why is this so important, what has been the impact of this programme in conflict prevention and peacebuilding?

AB: The Global Pillar is where the previously called "thematic programmes" will be housed. Conflict-prevention and peacebuilding has been funded by the EU mainly through thematic programming and rapid response. The new MFF would largely shift it to geographic programming ("geographisation"), while retaining a peace and resilience objective in the Global Pillar. At the moment, geographic programming units don't have the expertise and staffing to undertake conflict prevention and peacebuilding at scale. We're therefore asking that 'geographisation' comes with the right kind



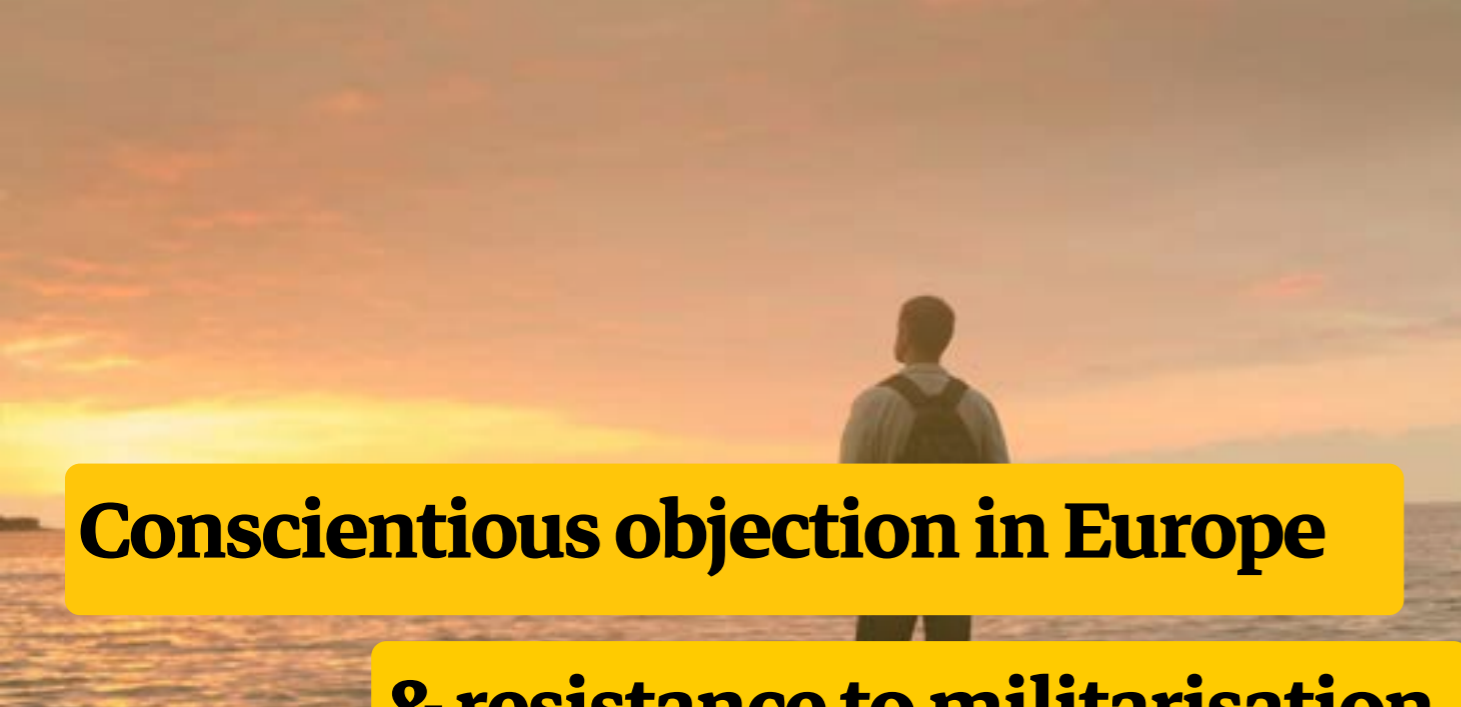
of expertise and staffing, and we're also recommending that the Global Pillar be better funded. As highlighted by the OECD-DAC 2025 peer review of the EU, the EU's programming on conflict prevention and peacebuilding has had outstanding impacts - and here, the Service for Foreign Policy Instruments has been in the lead of flexible, responsive peace programming.

QCEA: A core principle of the current EU Common Foreign and Security Policy is the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda, as established in UN Security Council Resolution 1325. How effective has this been in the current MFF?

AB: We are clearly not there yet, but the EU's efforts have been significant. The 25th anniversary of the WPS UNSC resolution this year has created momentum to continue this work and ensure WPS in the next MFF. Member States bolstered this in December 2025. A key issue now is what Gender Targets will apply to external action in the next MFF. EPLO is promoting 20% for actions that have gender action as a principal objective and 85% for actions that have gender action as a principal or significant objective. These targets should be enshrined in the articles of the Global Europe regulation to be fully binding. One key element that needs to be addressed is the scope of the conflict sensitivity requirement. T. All EU-funded actions, including Global Gateway infrastructure projects, should be required to be conflict-sensitive.

QCEA: What can we do to ensure that the EU continues to contribute to peacebuilding in the next MFF?

AB: We need to remind stakeholders in these negotiations that the EU has an important track-record and toolbox in this field. There is the principled element, the EU's Treaties and its deep-rooted political commitment to building peace, as one of the most successful peace projects itself. But there are also self-interest conflicts, even when distant, have repercussions for the EU and its citizens. The question is not whether the EU can afford to address fragility: it's whether it can afford not to.



Conscientious objection in Europe

& resistance to militarisation

At a time when several states are expanding conscription, tightening mobilisation rules, and amplifying fear-driven political narratives, the need to protect the right to conscientious objection to military service has become more important than ever.

Who is the conscientious objector?

While the most immediate image of a conscientious objector may be that of someone who has refused military service their entire life on the basis of deeply held pacifist convictions, the reality is more nuanced. We believe this category should extend beyond that traditional definition to encompass those involved in peace activism, as well as deserters and individuals who refuse military service for other reasons, including fear for their own lives.

Furthermore, protecting conscientious objectors to military conscription is important, but it forms only one part of a broader effort to resist militarisation. Many people oppose war not through personal refusal of service, but through activism, public education, journalism, or community organising. These people are also vulnerable to persecution. A democratic society must protect not only those who refuse to fight, but also those who challenge militarisation itself and those who suffer because of it.

Legal and moral foundations

The human right to conscientious objection is protected under Article 10(2) of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights, and Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. These instruments affirm that freedom of thought, conscience, and religion includes the right to refuse compulsory military service when it conflicts with deeply held ethical, religious, or philosophical convictions.

Expanding militarisation and shrinking protections

Ten EU member states currently maintain some form of compulsory military service - Austria, Croatia, Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Greece, Latvia, Lithuania, and Sweden - with several others actively reconsidering its reintroduction in light of shifting security concerns. At the same time the access to the alternative service is often limited. In many countries (such as Cyprus or Finland), alternative service remains punitive, excessively long, or inaccessible.

Furthermore, the space for conscientious objection is narrowing in the neighbouring countries as well. In their last [Annual Report](#), the European Bureau for Conscientious Objection (EBCO) has documented ongoing violations in Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, and Türkiye, where objectors face prosecution, imprisonment, or forced mobilisation.

Barriers to protection for Russian objectors

Under EU law - in particular the EU Qualification Directive (2011/95/EU) - persons facing persecution on grounds of conscience or belief, including refusal of military service, are eligible to seek international protection. Furthermore, the European Parliament's resolution of 16 February 2023, "One year of Russia's invasion and war of aggression against Ukraine", went further, explicitly demanding that Member States provide protection for conscientious objectors and deserters fleeing Belarus, Russia, and occupied Ukraine.

The European Union has been notably reluctant to provide refuge to Russian conscientious objectors and anti-war activists

However, the European Union has been notably reluctant to provide refuge to Russian conscientious objectors and anti-war activists, despite clear evidence that these individuals face persecution and that their refusal to serve directly weakens Russia's capacity to wage war.



The European Bureau for Conscientious Objection (EBCO) highlights that very few Russian objectors have been able to obtain asylum in the EU, often being forced to stay in neighbouring countries such as Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. Applicants are frequently told to apply from within Russia - an approach that is both unsafe and practically impossible. As a result, the EU's stated commitment to protecting objectors remains largely symbolic.

Forthcoming publication

QCEA works alongside other faith-based and peace organisations to advocate for the rights of conscientious objectors, including urging governments to provide non-punitive alternatives to military service. In the coming months, we will publish new work highlighting the challenges, motivations, and personal stories of conscientious objectors in Europe today. Stay tuned for more updates on it!





Pact on Migration and Asylum

Updates on the implementation

With the start of the Cypriot EU Council Presidency, implementation of the Pact on Migration and Asylum has become a central priority. The Presidency has committed to swiftly concluding negotiations on the Safe Country of Origin and Safe Third Country provisions - cornerstones of a system that prioritises deterrence and deportation over access to protection.

The Council already adopted its negotiating position on the proposed Return Regulation in early December, before Cyprus assumed the Presidency. The text goes beyond the European Commission's original proposal, expanding the use and length of immigration detention, widening the grounds for detention -including for children -and endorsing the possibility of return centres outside the EU. Civil society organisations have strongly criticised these measures, warning that they risk normalising intrusive enforcement practices, such as home raids, and weakening safeguards that protect fundamental rights.

Alongside these developments, the Commission has launched the first annual Migration Management Cycle, introducing a new "solidarity pool" mechanism. Rather than prioritising relocation of asylum seekers, the mechanism allows Member States identified as under "migration pressure" to receive financial or operational support as an alternative. While presented as a flexible solidarity tool, critics argue that it may further shift responsibility away from meaningful responsibility-sharing and toward financial compensation models. The mechanism is expected to begin in June 2026.

Taken together, these steps signal a continued consolidation of a securitised approach to migration governance. As the Pact moves from negotiation to implementation, there is a growing risk that efficiency and control will overshadow protection, human dignity, and long-term social cohesion. The direction set in the coming months will be decisive in determining whether the EU's migration framework strengthens shared responsibility—or deepens existing tensions within and beyond its borders.



The Democracy Shield

How civic space is shrinking on the EU level

For several years, EU institutions have been worried about the erosion of democracies, both globally and within. Last November the Commission launched a pair of initiatives to address democracy in the EU, the Democracy Shield and EU Strategy for Civil Society. Through these efforts the Commission commendably acknowledges the importance of free media, fair elections and a vibrant civil society for democracy to survive. But at the same time, civil society participation in the Commission remains selective and there is an alarming hostility towards civil society in the Parliament.

While the new initiatives notably include positive efforts to promote independent journalism and increase funding to Non-governmental Organisations (NGOs), there remain contradictions to what is being done elsewhere in the institutions. The Commission, Parliament and Council could be more transparent in which officials are responsible for what policies, and how they can be contacted. Instead, the current system favours organisations already operating in the EU policy circles known as the Brussels Bubble, giving them access through closed door briefings. This can exclude smaller NGOs and grassroots movements that may not have the resources to stay updated on developments within the institutions.

Yet these are the groups who often have better knowledge of what the real situation is on the ground, that need to be heard when developing policies.

Even the well-placed organisations are now facing constraints on their civic space. In early 2025, some Members of the European Parliament began criticising public funding for NGOs, falsely claiming that environmental NGOs were lobbying on behalf of the Commission. Despite a boycott from four political groups (Socialists and Democrats, Renew, Greens/EFA and the Left), in June the Parliament created a Scrutiny Working Group on NGOs (SWG). Its scope has since increased beyond environmental organisations to include other NGOs which have condemned the creation of the SWG. While it is only due to release a report in the coming months, the SWG already has had a chilling effect on NGOs - particularly those who receive EU funding.

If the Commission believes that a strong civil society is essential to our democracy, defending the NGOs that are already in the Brussels Bubble should be an obvious place to start.

A new strategy 2026-2030

Upholding Quaker values in a time of uncertainty

QCEA has been developing a 2026-2030 strategy to guide our work in the current permacrisis of widening inequality, climate breakdown, renewed racial injustice, an entrenched fortress mentality and mass displacements.

While we recognise the severity of these times, we do not want to be overtaken by fear and we will continue working towards a Europe that respects human dignity. Our strategy will be focused on three pillars:

1. Address the Intersections of Climate, Migration, and Peace
2. Rethinking Security in Europe
3. Speaking Truth to Power in a Crisis of Democracy

We will continue to collaborate with diverse stakeholders in Brussels, but we really get our strength from Friends across Europe. So please stay in touch as we advance equality, justice and peace together.

QCEA & QVA Study Tour

Between 30 November and 4 December 2026, we will organise something special. Together with Quaker Voluntary Action, we will host a study tour allowing our community to get to know us and our work better. This retreat offers a chance to explore how Quakers contribute to policy and peacebuilding within the European Union, all while enjoying the rich cultural life of Belgium.

Participants will visit Quaker House and nearby European institutions, meet civil society groups and EU officials, and take part in workshops, guest talks, and themed discussions. The program also includes opportunities to explore Brussels through cultural visits and shared activities. Each day begins and ends with Meeting for Worship, including time with the local Brussels Quaker community.

Open to anyone aged 18 and over, the retreat also welcomes those new to Quakerism. The theme is 'Pathways to Peace', so participants will have the opportunity to explore what that means to the world and understand what that means to them as individuals.

Learn more about the retreat on the Quaker Voluntary Action website: <https://qva.org.uk/qcea/>



Farewell from Xavier

Looking back at 20 years of working for QCEA

How can I summarize nearly 23 years of collaboration with QCEA, almost a quarter of a century of commitment to an association representing Quakers in Brussels, which I knew absolutely nothing about when I answered an advert in a Brussels newspaper? From the moment I arrived for the job interview one day in August 2003, I immediately felt "something" happening when I saw the Quaker House from the outside. This feeling was reinforced once I was inside: I knew, even before the interview panel asked me a single question, that I wanted to work there. Thankfully, I was hired! I thank Liz Scurfield, Martina Weitsch (the directors in 2003), and Richard Condon (QCEA Clerk) for trusting me and allowing me to begin these years of collaboration.

During these 23 years, I worked alongside more than 40 different people on staff: directors, program assistants, program officers, not to mention the members of the Executive Committee and the General Assembly. It was an incredible and fascinating human experience, from which I will only remember the positive aspects, and there are many. Thank you to all these people with whom so many bonds were forged.

This human adventure intertwined with the life of Quaker House: two years after my arrival, Quaker House was listed as a historic monument. Drawing on my experience renovating listed buildings in my other job, I started, in close collaboration with Liz and Martina, the fabulous experience of renovating the interiors of the house, and in particular those famous wallpapers that visitors to the house can admire today. In this unique setting, QCEA's projects and the Meeting find a special resonance that inspires us to always strive for excellence, in our work, in our pursuit of dialogue with God, or anything else...

But I'm not leaving QCEA and the Quaker House entirely! I will continue to look after the house, its upkeep, and the upcoming renovation projects that will begin this year. The adventure continues, much to my delight.

Yours, Xavier



Donate to QCEA today

QCEA's important work on peace and human rights **depends on your generous support**. Over 50% of our income comes from donations, and we receive no money from the European institutions meaning we can **speak truth to power** without fear or favour.

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