



*Statement prepared by the COMECE Commission on
External Affairs of the European Union:*

Europe, renew your vocation to promote peace

The world today is experiencing **significant geopolitical shifts**. The unjust Russian aggression against Ukraine has not only brought horrific suffering to the Ukrainian people, but it has also greatly challenged the vision of a rules-based international order. The gradual erosion of trust in multilateral mechanisms, the regression into the logic of a great power confrontation, along with diminishing respect for fundamental human values and principles of peaceful coexistence, may be listed among the factors that have contributed to this development.

Despite the European Union's **aspiration to become a stronger global actor for peace**, its Member States have often not been able to find the necessary unity to take decisive and coherent actions, due to indifference, naivety and the prevalence of particular economic or national interests over the common good. The COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's military invasion of Ukraine may have held up a mirror to us, prompting the European Union to realise how crucial its role is to **offer a renewed strategic vision for stability, justice and peace** to the European continent and to the world.

We commend the unprecedented assistance provided by the European Union and its Member States to Ukraine and its people, while urging the EU together with the international community, not to cease their efforts for **an end of the war, with a free, secure and independent Ukraine** in its internationally recognised borders. While lasting peace will only be possible on the basis of a negotiated agreement, the right of Ukraine to legitimate self-defence in line with the principles of international law cannot be denied.

In view of building a **new architecture of peace** in Europe and globally, with a **strong value basis** as well as **respect for human dignity and human rights of every person** at its core, we encourage European decision-makers, in particular, to:

- **Elaborate an EU Peace Strategy** based on a comprehensive definition of peace that would help to strengthen an integral approach to promoting human security and peace, while reinforcing EU's civilian peacebuilding policies to prevent more effectively future violent conflicts from erupting.

- **Renew and implement the commitment to a credible EU enlargement process** with all European countries that have submitted their application, including the opening of accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia and granting a candidate status to Ukraine.
- **Foster value-based multilateral and multi-stakeholder partnerships** to adequately address regional and global challenges, notably the looming food and energy crisis, the reconstruction of Ukraine, as well as climate change and a just recovery from the pandemic; at the same time, reduce dependence on non-democratic regimes by diversifying supply chains and ensuring their sustainability and ethicality.
- **Engage responsibly and collaboratively on security** by developing adequate means of European defence as part of a comprehensive approach, while ensuring strict public scrutiny of compliance with the principles of proportionality, adequacy as well as the respect for human rights, the rule of law and ethical standards.
- **Promote a transformation of international relations towards a genuine global community**, with a more effective United Nations at its heart and stronger multilateral cooperation on ensuring accountability for international crimes.

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BACKGROUND DOCUMENT

“Now in the night of the war that is fallen upon humanity, please, let us not allow the dream of peace to fade!” (Pope Francis¹)

Since 2016, when the Bishops of COMECE presented their reflections on *Europe’s Vocation to Promote Peace in the World*², the realities in Europe and globally have faced **significant changes and shifts**. With Brexit, eroding trust in multilateral mechanisms and a regression into the logic of a great power competition or even confrontation, manifesting itself through various means of hybrid warfare, the **vision of a rules-based global order** based on mutual understanding and cooperation has been **greatly challenged**. There was **hope that the COVID-19 pandemic** - having exposed the vulnerabilities and shortcomings of the economic, social and health systems of individual countries in Europe and globally – would strengthen the spirit of solidarity, interdependence and multilateral partnerships, and that its end would **mark a new beginning of a more just, peaceful and sustainable world**.

And yet, the **unjust and inhumane military aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine** has not only brought horrific suffering to the innocent people in Ukraine, but it has also shaken up the whole security architecture in Europe and beyond. With on-going grave challenges to human rights and democracy in Belarus, frozen conflicts and other de-stabilising events both in the East and the South, often fuelled by external actors, the neighbourhood of the European Union has experienced

¹ Address of Pope Francis to the authorities, civil society and the diplomatic corps during his Apostolic Journey to Malta (2 April 2022),
<https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2022/april/documents/20220402-malta-autorita.html>.

² <https://www.comece.eu/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2022/04/20160614-Europes-vocation-to-promote-peace-in-the-world-A-COMECE-contribution-in-view-of-the-forthcoming-EU-global-strategy-on-foreign-and-security-policy.pdf>.

significant pressures over recent years. These developments have also shown that peace and stability cannot be built merely on the basis of trade and investment mechanisms, if these are not embedded in a broader framework aimed at fostering a common basis of values and principles.

Even though “*a world war fought piecemeal*”³ has been going on in many parts of the world and the signs of a potential violent conflict on the European continent have been gradually manifesting themselves in recent years, the Member States of the European Union have often not been able to find the **necessary unity to agree on adequate approaches** and means to pursue an **effective policy of “pre-emptive peace-building”**⁴. Indifference, naivety, ignorance of the true meaning of the founding values of the European Union and the prevalence of particular economic or national interests over the common good may have contributed to policy incoherencies, thus preventing the achievement of a united European political will that would have allowed the EU to become a more **effective actor for human development and peace in our neighbourhood and worldwide**.

Nevertheless, the COVID-19 pandemic as well as the war in Ukraine seem to have reinforced a sense of community in Europe. Commendably, the Member States of the European Union were quick in showing **unity over the provision of assistance to Ukraine and its people**, and addressing the Russian aggression with substantial restrictive measures, even if agreement about more ambitious steps – potentially implying self-sacrifices and adaptations in our own well-being– may still be lagging behind. The on-going war on the European continent has to stop as soon as possible, with a free, secure and independent Ukraine in its internationally recognised borders. While lasting peace will only be possible on the basis of a negotiated agreement, the right of Ukraine to legitimate self-defence in line with the principles of international law cannot be denied.

The recent events have also exposed the Union's dependence on non-democratic regimes and highlighted the need to diversify supply chains, while protecting human dignity and fundamental freedoms. In this respect, the European Union has already launched a number of initiatives aimed at fostering its “**strategic autonomy**” in

³ Pope Francis, Encyclical letter *Fratelli tutti*, 259, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html .

⁴ Cf. The EU Global Strategy on Foreign and Security Policy and the report of COMECE on Europe's Vocation to Promote Peace in the World (2016), <https://www.comece.eu/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2022/04/20160614-Europes-vocation-to-promote-peace-in-the-world-A-COMECE-contribution-in-view-of-the-forthcoming-EU-global-strategy-on-foreign-and-security-policy.pdf>.

different domains from trade, health and industry over to energy and security⁵. Marked by the ambition to better act, protect, invest and partner in view of bolstering Europe's defence capabilities, the EU has very recently also defined the **strategic direction for its Security and Defence Policy**⁶.

The on-going geopolitical developments and the rapidly changing world realities may have prompted the **European Union** to realise how crucial its role is to **offer a renewed strategic vision for stability, justice and peace to the European continent and to the world.**

WHAT ROLE FOR THE EUROPEAN UNION IN A WORLD MARKED BY DISTRUST AND DIVISIONS?

For Pope Francis, *“a real and lasting peace will only be possible on the basis of a global ethic of solidarity and cooperation in the service of a future shaped by interdependence and shared responsibility in the whole human family”*⁷. Taking inspiration from Robert Schuman, the Holy Father encourages the European Union to *“rediscover the path of fraternity”*⁸, while recalling *“the firm conviction of the founders of the European Union, who envisioned a future based on the capacity to work together in bridging divisions and in fostering peace and fellowship between all the peoples of this continent”*⁹.

Reacting to the on-going war in Ukraine, Pope Francis stated during his recent Apostolic Journey to Malta¹⁰: *“Today, it is difficult to think with the logic of peace. We have gotten used to thinking with the logic of war.[...] War has in fact been prepared for some time by great investments in weaponry and a massive trade in arms. It is distressing to see how the enthusiasm for peace, which emerged after the Second World War, has faded in these recent decades, as has the progress of the international community, with a few powers who go ahead on their own account,*

⁵ Cf. The Versailles Declaration of 10 and 11 March 2022, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/54773/20220311-versailles-declaration-en.pdf>.

⁶ Cf. The EU Strategic Compass, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/03/21/a-strategic-compass-for-a-stronger-eu-security-and-defence-in-the-next-decade/>.

⁷ Pope Francis, Encyclical letter *Fratelli tutti*, 127.

⁸ Pope Francis, Letter on Europe (22 October 2020), https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2020/documents/papa-francesco_20201022_lettera-parolin-europa.html.

⁹ Pope Francis, Encyclical letter *Fratelli tutti*, 10.

¹⁰ Address of Pope Francis to the authorities, civil society and the diplomatic corps during his Apostolic Journey to Malta (2 April 2022), <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2022/april/documents/20220402-malta-autorita.html>.

*seeking spaces and zones of influence. In this way, not only **peace**, but also **so many great questions, like the fight against hunger and inequality** are no longer on the list of the main political agendas.”*

Building upon the words of Pope Francis, we believe that despite changing world realities, the **three pillars**, as proposed by the Bishops of COMECE in 2016¹¹, still remain a **valid basis for an authentic European Peace Policy: 1) Pre-emptive Peacebuilding; 2) Peace through Justice; 3) Peace through Security.**

As the [EU Global Strategy on Foreign and Security Policy](#) rightly recognised, “*preventing conflicts is more efficient and effective than engaging with crises after they break out. Once a conflict does erupt, it typically becomes ever more intractable over time*”. Nevertheless, also in light of the current developments in our Eastern neighbourhood, it is our impression that the chapter of the EU Global Strategy on “**Pre-emptive Peacebuilding**” has received less attention, as compared to the other strategic priorities.

Even if the European Union continues to be the largest donor of development and humanitarian assistance worldwide¹², incoherencies across policy fields, notably the trade, agricultural, human rights and development policies, as well as inconsistencies in arms exports practices of EU Member States, have in several instances prevented the EU from effectively **promoting peace through justice.**

As the current security situation demonstrates, “*as long as the danger of war persists, the right to a lawful self-defence cannot be denied once all peace efforts have failed*”¹³. Thus, in cases of an unjust aggressor, it is also legitimate to contribute to **establishing just conditions through the use of force**, by developing or providing “*adequate defence means in compliance with the principle of sufficiency*” and in full respect of international law, while resisting the temptation to “overmilitarise” policies and budgets at the expense of civilian means of peace promotion.

¹¹ Cf. FN 2.

¹² Cf. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_21_1701.

¹³ Cf. FN2.

**ACTING AS A TRUSTFUL, RESPONSIBLE AND INTEGRATING FORCE
TO PROMOTE HUMAN DEVELOPMENT AND PEACE
IN OUR NEIGHBOURHOOD AND ACROSS THE GLOBE**

In order for the European Union to enhance its capacities for the promotion of peace and for better contributing to **building a new “architecture of peace”**¹⁴ in Europe and worldwide, we submit to European decision-makers the following proposals for their consideration:

PRE-EMPTIVE PEACEBUILDING

→ **Embed the [EU Strategic Compass](#) in a broader EU Peace Strategy:**

As it is broadly accepted that **peace implies more than the mere absence of war and violence**, since it requires coherent efforts aimed at promoting *integral human development, justice, human rights and the care of the environment*¹⁵, we recommend that the EU could elaborate in dialogue with relevant stakeholders, including academia, the civil society as well as Churches and religious communities, **a strategic document providing a comprehensive definition of peace and strengthening an integral approach** to human security and peace. This may also include a **specific sub-chapter on “Pre-emptive peace-building”** and the setting up of an **EU Human Security & Peace Index**¹⁶ with people-centred benchmarks allowing the EU to pursue more **coherently and effectively a holistic approach** to fostering human security as an enabler for sustainable and inclusive development worldwide.

PEACE THROUGH JUSTICE

→ **Renew and implement the commitment to a credible EU enlargement process:**

In view of the strategic importance of EU integration for stability, prosperity and peace on the European continent, the EU and its Member States should renew their commitment to pursuing a **credible EU enlargement process** with all European countries that have submitted their application. In particular, we call for **granting Ukraine a candidate status and opening accession negotiations with**

¹⁴ Cf. Pope Francis, Encyclical letter *Fratelli tutti*, 228 ff.

¹⁵ Cf. COMECE, *Whose Security, Whose Defence?* (2017), <https://www.comece.eu/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2022/04/20170619-COMECE-Contribution-future-European-Defence.pdf>.

¹⁶ Cf. A similar initiative currently being developed at the level of the African Union: <https://www.un.org/humansecurity/hsprogramme/ahsi/>.

Albania and North Macedonia in recognition of the steps they have accomplished on the path towards European integration.

→ **Pursue a more strategic approach to value-based multilateral and multi-stakeholder partnerships:**

The interconnectedness of today's world realities, along with multiple crises of global dimensions, demonstrate the importance for the EU to pursue a **“relational strategic autonomy”** by **deepening alliances with like-minded partners** in our neighbourhood and beyond to find adequate responses to regional and global challenges, notably a people-centred and just recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, a more peaceful and welcoming world, a better care of our common home¹⁷, as well as **countering the looming food and energy crisis**. A particular multilateral solidarity will also be needed for the **reconstruction of** damaged public infrastructure, civilian building as well as religious and cultural sites in **Ukraine**. The changing geopolitical realities, marked by divisions and distrust, however, also underline the need for reflecting on **new ways of constructive and value-based engagement that can foster mutual trust**. It is in the DNA of the European Union with its broad range of policy areas and instruments, ranging from trade, diplomacy, human rights to development, energy and climate policies, to **use them for opening up channels of dialogue and cooperation**. At the same time, attention needs to be paid to **reducing dependence on non-democratic regimes** by diversifying supply chain and ensuring their sustainability and ethicality, including by addressing forced labour and other practices that suppress freedom and human dignity. Moreover, the EU could better explore the potential of **stronger partnerships with non-governmental actors**, including the **civil society and religious actors**. In this regard, we may refer to the current [EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy](#) which stipulates that the EU shall **“reach out to religious and faith-based actors and assess how they can be involved in the protection and promotion of human rights, in delivering the sustainable development goals, and in peace making, conflict prevention, reconciliation and mediation, and find synergies with ongoing UN initiatives”**. The role of civil society and religious actors will also be crucial for the peace-building and reconciliation efforts in the context of the war in Ukraine.

¹⁷ Cf. COMECE-USCCB, *Shared Responsibility for the Whole Human Family* (2021), <https://www.comece.eu/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2022/04/20210608-Shared-Responsibility-for-the-Whole-Human-Family-COMECE-USCCB-declaration-towards-a-renewed-transatlantic-partnership.pdf> .

PEACE THROUGH SECURITY

→ Engage responsibly and collaboratively on security:

In case trust is betrayed and all civilian peace-building efforts have failed, we acknowledge the need to **develop and possess adequate means of defence** to counter threats of a military nature as part of a comprehensive approach. In this regard, it may be considered positive that the EU Strategic Compass has introduced a regular assessment of multifaceted threats confronting the EU in view of **developing a shared European strategic culture** and fostering partnerships with other security actors, notably the UN, NATO and the OSCE. While recognising the need for a more effective bundling of European defence capabilities, we urge that the spending on defence research and technology be accompanied by **strict public scrutiny**, assessing its compliance with the principles of *proportionality*, *adequacy* as well as the *respect for human rights*, the *rule of law* and *ethical standards*. Particular caution is called for **automated defence technologies**, such as uncrewed armed systems, whose development and deployment should only be conducted following a strict legal and ethical assessment “*on the basis of a clearly defined anthropological and ethical reference framework*”¹⁸. In the context of the [European Defence Fund](#) and the [European Peace Facility](#), we thus suggest the elaboration of **EU Guidelines on defence-related research as well as technology development and deployment** to ensure that the defence equipment financed by the European Union is **put at the service of human security and peace**. In addition, **more effective, coherent and accountable regulatory frameworks for arms exports** should be developed and implemented at the European level. In order not to reinforce an armament dynamic in Europe and globally, an intensified defence cooperation among Member States should go hand in hand with **multilateral engagement for disarmament and for non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction**. As the current situation demonstrates, the continued possession of nuclear weapons poses an existential threat to humanity and is not consistent with international legal obligations to promote peace and sustainable development. We therefore call on the European Union and its Member States to update its [Strategy against proliferation of weapons of mass destruction of 2003](#) in order to reflect the recent legal¹⁹, geopolitical and technological developments, and step up its international engagement towards a world free from nuclear weapons.

¹⁸ Cf. COMECE, Technology at the service of peace (2019), https://www.comece.eu/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2022/01/pdf_20190701.pdf.

¹⁹ Notably the entry into force of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW).

→ **Promote a transformation of international relations towards a genuine global community:**

Despite its numerous commendable humanitarian and development achievements, the United Nations Organisation has been increasingly showing its inability to prevent major violent conflicts from erupting. As also the war in Ukraine demonstrates, it is clear that the **structures and procedures of international organisations**, notably the UN, are in **need of adaptation** in order to become a more effective instrument for conflict resolution and multilateral diplomacy and to enforce the respect for the UN Charter and for international humanitarian law. The EU should thus promote a **reform of the United Nations system** *“in the pursuit of the ultimate goal of granting all countries, without exception, a share in, and a genuine and equitable influence on, decision-making processes”*²⁰. In view of the primary responsibility of the UN Security Council for maintaining international security and peace, a review of its way of working should also be envisaged, ensuring that it **reflects the new world realities** and is **not paralysed by particular state interests**.

Intensified international cooperation will also be needed to document, collect evidence and **ensure accountability** for grave violations of human rights, war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in Ukraine and in other atrocious conflicts. With its instruments, notably those of *Europol* and *Eurojust*, the European Union can make an important contribution in this respect.

Europe and the world now seem to be at a **crossroads**. With Pope Francis, we appeal on the European Union and its Member States *“not to allow the dream of peace to fade”*. It is our **hope** that a **new Europe** may just be in the process of being born. A Europe of **values** and not of particular interests, a Europe of **open arms** and not walls, a Europe for which **human dignity, justice, freedom and democracy** are not just empty words, but fundamental principles on which a peaceful and prosperous future can be built. A Europe that is not closed in itself, but **open to further enlargement**. A Europe that assumes its **responsibility in ensuring security**, without reinforcing armament dynamics. A Europe that does not rely on a mentality of fear, but cherishes a **culture of encounter and peace**.

²⁰ Pope Francis, Meeting with the Members of the General Assembly of the United Nations Organization (25 September 2015), https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/september/documents/papa-francesco_20150925_onu-visita.html.