



## Opening remarks of H.E. Mgr. Jan Vokál, President of the COMECE Commission on EU External Relations

Honourable Members of the European Parliament,  
Distinguished representatives of EU institutions,  
Excellencies, dear ladies, and gentlemen,

Let me first of all express our gratitude to the host of our debate today, Mrs. Miriam Lexmann, Member of the European Parliament and her team, for allowing us to hold our discussion in this House in which important decisions about the future of Europe are being taken. My thanks also go to all the distinguished speakers who have kindly accepted to share their insights together with the members of the COMECE Commission on EU External Relations, the Apostolic Nuncio to the EU and other participants to our roundtable.

The theme of our discussion today – *“The war in Ukraine and on-going security challenges in the EU’s Eastern neighbourhood”* – invites us to particularly focus our reflection on two aspects: the role of the European Union in promoting lasting peace in the region, and the region’s European future.

In its [contribution elaborated](#) almost precisely a year ago, the COMECE Commission on EU External Relations stated that *“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 destabilising events both in the East and the South, often fuelled by external actors, the neighbourhood of the European Union has experienced 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”*.

Speaking to the Bishops of COMECE in March this year, [Pope Francis highlighted](#) that advancing the cause of peace requires three essential elements: *prophecy, foresight and creativity*, while a true builder of peace must be both an *architect* and a *craftsman*.

In the context of the consultation on the future of the Eastern Partnership framework in 2019, the Secretariat of COMECE [elaborated a contribution](#) in which it encouraged the EU to focus more strategically on enhancing the conditions for human security and peace in its Eastern neighbourhood, not least in view of the protracted and frozen conflicts harmfully affecting persons, families and communities across the region. Among the proposals put forward by our experts with regard to strengthening preventive diplomacy was, for example, the establishment of an EU Special Envoy for the Eastern Partnership, and we are grateful that Mr. Dirk Schuebel [the current EU Special Envoy] is with us

today. COMECE has also been advocating for reinforcing the EU's 'pre-emptive peacebuilding' policies, such as early warning and early action mechanisms, but also more medium- and long-term processes of trust-building and reconciliation among communities, with the involvement of various stakeholders, including religious actors from the grassroots. While it may be too late or too early to take such measures during an ongoing violent conflict, such steps are crucial for sustaining a just and lasting peace, and they should become an integral part of a possible future 'European Peace Strategy', which may offer a comprehensive definition of the concept of 'peace' and provide a framework for effectively putting into practice the EU's integrated approach to peacebuilding.

Peace - in the understanding which the Catholic Church promotes - implies the absence of war and violence, but it also goes beyond mere state security considerations. Following an integral approach, building lasting peace requires the establishment of an order which is based on justice, integral human development, respect for fundamental human rights and the care of our common home.

And this brings me to the second point - the European integration of the Eastern Partnership region. Recognising the diversity of the countries and their free choices, those aspiring for closer ties with the European Union or even a future membership, should be allowed to embark on this path. With the on-going war on European soil and the application of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, the EU accession process regains strategic importance for stability, prosperity and peace in Europe. The enlargement process has to be, however, credible and it has to adequately respond to the expectations of the candidate countries' citizens, otherwise it risks backfiring and fomenting anti-European sentiments. Against the background of these changing realities, some have been raising existential questions regarding the future of the Eastern partnership framework: can it run in parallel with the EU accession process? Does the multilateral dimension bring an added value to the bilateral ways of cooperation? And what about the other countries in the region that have no European aspirations?

I know that I may be asking more questions than providing answers, but I hope that our today's debate will help us to identify some of the elements for the way ahead. The ongoing geopolitical developments and the rapidly changing world realities are urging the European Union to realise how crucial it is to offer to the continent a renewed strategic vision for stability, justice and peace, rooted in a strong value basis and with respect for human dignity at its core.

Thank you for your attention and I look forward to the debate.