

European Conference on
***Peace Building in Europe: What Role
for Catholic Social Thought and Universal Values?***
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Keynote to the Plenary Session on
European Integration as a Pathway to Peace

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The overarching theme of this conference is a question: *Peace Building in Europe: What Role for Catholic Social Thought and Universal Values?* I would affirm that, while Catholic Social Teaching is perhaps the most constantly evolving body of Church's teachings, it remains relevant in today's peacebuilding in Europe.

However, the task assigned to me is not to justify an unsolicited answer to the main theme. I have been specifically asked to keynote this Plenary Session on *European Integration as a Pathway to Peace* with a reflection on **EU Enlargement as a Pathway to Peace**.

Being relatively new as Apostolic Nuncio to the European Union, I spent the seven months of my presence in Brussels, from June 2025 up to now, doing visits to EU institutions and Diplomatic Missions to the Union. In all my conversations I sensed a general feeling, indeed, a consensus, that Europe is facing deep and multiple crises, in particular in the areas of security and global trade. The Russian aggression against Ukraine and the current US Administration's security policy render Europe insecure, while the unsettling highly volatile global trade environment coupled with the fiercely competitive AI-powered economies in other parts of the globe make Europe appear less competitive.

The perception, if not the reality, that Europe's place and role in the world stage is slipping away has generated a great sense of urgency. So, the marching order is to fight, as the President of the European Commission made it clear in her State of the Union Address to the European Parliament on September 10 last year: *Europe is in a fight. A fight for... a free and independent Europe. A fight for our values and our democracies. A fight for our liberty and our ability to determine our destiny for ourselves... this is a fight for our future...* A fight that requires the ability to face tectonic shifts, enormous resources and heroic sacrifices. And great opportunities, as well.

The Holy See thinks the same way, and sees even deeper causes of this malaise, as the Cardinal Secretary of State made it clear in his Homily during the Mass for the VIII Centenary of the Cathedral of Brussels on January 11: *L'Europe vit aujourd'hui une période marquée par la fragilité, les peurs et les fractures, qui ne sont pas seulement politiques ou sociales, mais aussi intérieures et culturelles, des difficultés qui la minent à ses racines.*

During my said visits, I always asked opinions on **EU enlargement**, specifically on what impact have on the process the war in Ukraine and the fear that EU enlargement in a time of crisis might compromise the Union itself. The answers varied little, because the overwhelming opinion is that the Russian aggression against Ukraine and the shock before the US Administration's new security and economic policies have helped dissipate EU self-doubt; indeed, they have become catalysts to firm up the policy that EU enlargement is a geopolitical imperative.

The European Commission affirms in its latest Enlargement package that EU enlargement stands high on the priority agenda and that the accession of new Member States is increasingly within reach. The virtues of EU enlargement have become a constant, a mantra, in the speeches of the EU high authorities after some hiatus and hesitations. To sidestep fears that a rush to admit new Members who may not yet be ready would weaken the Union, the EU Authorities always emphasize a merit-based approach to accession, underlining that the pace of a candidate's adherence would be based on the pace of its reforms, in particular in the areas of democracy, the rule of law and fundamental rights.

I am fully convinced that the European integration has been, is and will be a pathway to peace. Both the United Nations and what is now the European Union were both born from the ashes of the Second World War. The opening line of the UN Charter affirms: *We the peoples of the United Nations determined to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, which twice in our lifetime has brought untold sorrow to mankind.* The 1950 Schuman Declaration, the seed out of which the European Union has grown, explicitly states that the unification of the Franco-German production of coal and steel *will make it plain that any war between France and Germany becomes not merely unthinkable, but materially impossible.... leading to the realization of the first concrete foundation of a European federation indispensable to the preservation of peace.* In other words, the primary goal was to secure peace through economic solidarity and cooperation following the devastation of the Second World War, leading to a greater union.

As to the specific question of EU enlargement, it is my honest opinion that a well-managed EU enlargement promotes peace and security, stability and prosperity for all, and is a vehicle for spreading and consolidating the principles underpinning the Union. The positive effects of EU enlargement do not only start at the moment a country becomes a member, but already with the aspiration to become one and the enthusiasm to accept the criteria of accession. The aspiration gives life to a roadmap to a more peaceful and prosperous future. The accession process consolidates the fight against corruption and the efforts to build more solid institutions and stable economy, etc.

My personal experience helps shape my opinion. Six of the ten candidates to EU accession are the Western Balkan States of Montenegro, Albania, North Macedonia,

Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia and Kosovo. I lived, worked and travelled rather extensively in the region during five years and a half, from 1993 to 1998. I was in Bulgaria during the Bosnian War and in Albania during the Serbia-Kosovo War. I would say that I have developed a strong attachment to the region, thus I feel personally invested in their candidacies for EU membership, keen to see how peoples and societies mired for centuries in internecine conflicts and shifting boundaries could evolve into peaceful and prosperous ones.

It is curious enough how, from an error of the German geographer August Zeune, the word *balkan* - the Turkish word for *mountain*, referring specifically to the mountain range that cuts through Bulgaria from Serbia to the Black Sea – became the name of the whole region. And perhaps even more curious how such a name geographically attributed by mistake to the whole region evolved into more of a socio-political than a geographical attribution. In fact, from *Balkan* we have *Balkanization*, whose meaning is completely alien from its original etymological and geographical roots, and has become a socio-political term to mean the breaking down of a country or region into often mutually hostile smaller, independent States, due to ethnic, cultural, historical or religious divisions or territorial irredentism and nationalist claims. It was, and is largely still, the reality in the region.

During my time in the Balkans, the consequences of the chaotic disintegration of the Ottoman Empire, of communism in steroids and the collapse of Yugoslavia were still devastating the region. Some practices of the Ottoman era and tribal structures were still observed. In my first trip to the Monastery of Rila, Bulgaria, I only saw completely black-clad women tilling the land, because, I was told, the men had to be always ready for war! In the northern Albanian Mountains, centuries-old chains of vendetta continued to shed blood. Abandoned rusting communist-era factories dotted the beautiful sceneries in Bulgaria, where theft of religious and cultural treasures were then rampant. Ruined schools and Enver Hoxha's "nuclear shelters" were ubiquitous in Albania.

The 1995 Dayton Accords ended the Bosnian War, but was cynically seen by many as a band aid over internecine ethnic wars. Yet, as Pope Leo XIV said in his January 9 Address to the Diplomatic Corps accredited to the Holy See, the Dayton Accords is one *those signs of courageous hope in our time for, despite difficulties and tensions, they opened up the possibility of a more prosperous and harmonious future.*

Bulgaria and Macedonia could not sign a simple agreement for the question of language. North Macedonia was stuck with the name of the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia due to Greek opposition to the use of *Macedonia*. Serbia was not able to prevent Montenegro's independence, but still they quarrelled over other matters. Serbia feels the loss of Kosovo as the loss of its identity. Kosovo considers its secession as a liberation from ethnic and nationalist repression. Albania remained extremely suspicious of Greek irredentism in its southern territories. In short, every

country in the region had headaches with a neighbour or two. Macedonia with five: to the east with Bulgaria for their linguistic differences; to the south with Greece for its name; to the west and northwest with Albania and Kosovo, as ethnic Albanians constitute two-thirds of its population; and to the north with Serbia due to Orthodox religious matters.

I met Kosovar guerillas in the Albanian Alps. I saw speedboats along the Adriatic Coast loaded with smuggled cigarettes and guns. I could have bought, but never would have, thousands of Kalashnikovs offered for five dollars on the sidewalks of Tirana and all over Albania in 1997. But I can assure you that I will never regret not having invested in the Ponzi schemes that traffickers used, not only to launder their dirty money, but also to steal whatever little savings the impoverished Albanians had under the pillows, causing the total collapse of Albania in 1997.

And look where we are now 30 or 25 years later: Croatia and Bulgaria are EU, NATO and Euro Members. Albania has long fulfilled its dream to join NATO and its EU accession is well within reach as it works on the last cluster of accession criteria. The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Greece finally agreed to settle for *North Macedonia*. Montenegro is approaching the finish line, with the possibility that the EU Accession Treaty could be formally launched this coming June.

In the region, impactful achievements continue to be reached and courageous choices taken, harbingers that *Balkanization* may one day be just a mere word in the dictionary. And a lesson well learned.

We know fully well that Bosnia-Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Serbia and Kosovo have much more challenging obstacles to hurdle and overcome, just like the other candidates Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova and Turkey.

But the EU's commitment to enlargement beacons also to them, not only as a good geopolitical policy, but also and even deeply as a conscious choice to spread the ideals that inspired, shaped and continue to give life to what is now the EU: to spare us and the future generations from the scourge of war and to assure lasting peace, security and prosperity for all.

The EU is definitely far from being perfect or a panacea to all of Europe's ills, and I am not canonizing it. As I jokingly said to an EU venerable elder, "It's bad, but it's the best we have". And it has been and remains a pathway to peace and prosperity.

Thank you for your attention.