Meeting of the Core Group
on the Establishment of a Special Tribunal
for the Crime of Aggression against Ukraine

19 March 2025, Strasbourg
Seminar room, ECHR

Opening speech by Theodoros Rousopoulos
President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe

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Dear Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honour for me to open this meeting of the Core Group. Today's gathering marks the final stage of an immense effort that has been ongoing since 2022.

I cannot help but welcome the remarkable synergy between the intergovernmental and parliamentary bodies of this Organisation, which has enabled this unprecedented initiative — the Special Tribunal for the Crime of Aggression — to take shape.

I would like, in particular, to thank Mr Jörg Polakiewicz. Mr Polakiewicz, I know that you and your team have worked in excellent cooperation with successive PACE rapporteurs and have consistently acknowledged the crucial role played by the Assembly in supporting the idea of the special tribunal.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Even though we may take pride in this achievement, we must not forget the tragic reason that brought us here today.

The reason for our work is the brutal reality of a full-scale war. An aggression that started in 2014 with the occupation and illegal annexation

of Crimea and escalated into a full-scale war of aggression three years ago. Since then, Ukraine has lost 20% of its territory, suffered the devastation of its infrastructure, and, above all, endured the tragic loss of people's lives. There are still prisoners of war, civilians illegally detained, and families searching for their deported children.

When we woke up on the morning of 24 February 2022, the shock was immense. But the resilience that followed was even greater. There is no place for aggression in this Organisation. And accountability is not optional— it is an imperative.

PACE was the first international body to call for the establishment of such a tribunal, already in April 2022, just two months after the full-scale invasion. It did so unanimously. Since then, this call has been further detailed and reinforced through a series of strong resolutions.

PACE also fully supports the ongoing investigations by the International Criminal Court (ICC) into alleged war crimes, genocide, and crimes against humanity committed in Ukraine.

However, as has been rightly pointed out, the crime of aggression is a leadership crime — it requires a dedicated tribunal.

That is why I strongly welcome the drafting work that has been carried out and is now reaching its final stage. As a former minister myself, I understand that drafting a legal framework, especially in an international setting with multiple experts, is a complex exercise requiring consensus. But as a member of the Assembly, my role is also to convey the Assembly's position on certain key aspects that we believe should be included in the final draft: jurisdiction since 2014, no functional immunity, trials in absentia, the ICC definition of the crime of aggression and full compliance with international standards regarding the fair trial requirement.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

On every occasion, I have repeated—unceasingly— that peace for Ukraine must be just, based on international law and the rules-based order.

The Assembly has stated that the establishment of a Special Tribunal through an agreement between the CoE and Ukraine, supported by an enlarged partial agreement, is “the beast feasible option, in terms of legal basis and political legitimacy”, and that it clearly falls within the mandate of the organisation.

The Assembly stands ready to support the establishment of the Special Tribunal, based on the consensus emerging from this Core Group, which I hope can be presented at the Ministerial session in Luxembourg in May 2025. We will continue to express our unwavering support for completing this process and will call upon all Member States, as well as international partners such as the European Union, to join the agreement and ensure that the future tribunal is provided with the necessary resources to be fully operational.

As you are aware, the US has recently withdrawn from our collaborative efforts in this group. While this is disappointing, it should not hinder our progress.

As I mentioned earlier, holding an aggressor accountable is not merely an option; it is an imperative.

The Assembly was there at the very beginning to launch this challenging idea, and it remains committed to providing political support for the outstanding work that you, Ladies and Gentlemen, have carried out.

Thank you.