

**Address by the President of the Republic of Estonia Alar Karis at the 78th  
United Nations General Assembly**

**20 September 2023, New York**

Mr President,

Mr Secretary General,

Excellences,

Dear ladies and gentlemen,

Let me first express my deep condolences to the people of Morocco who lost their close ones to the earthquake and the people of Libya for their loss due to the catastrophic flooding.

The world is constantly changing. We live through difficult times and glorious moments, as human beings, as states and societies. As humankind, as global brother- and sisterhood. On this path called history we have learned that moments and situations do not repeat themselves fully. They rhyme. Our ability to learn from the past, to read the rhythm and flow of the verses of time is the source for the progress. This gives hope that the future rhymes will be nicer. That they will be free from the mistakes we've made before.

We are different as humans, states and societies. But I am certain that some things are universal. Like the simple wish for a better tomorrow. Or sincere joy of doing good. Feeling hope when somebody gives you a helping hand in the darkest moment and says that it is going to be alright. We are all entitled to live with dignity. We are all equal. Recognizing and accepting that is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world as postulated by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

These are the things that unite us. These are the values upon which we must build our future.

Our challenges are greatly common – ensuring sustainable peace and security, ending poverty, addressing climate change, finding best sustainable use for new technologies. Only nations with a united effort, with a shared vision, with an urge to understand each other in our differences and with a readiness to compromise, are able to tackle the great challenges of our time.

We know, our world is facing diverse intertwined crises reversing years of sustainable development gains. This is heartbreaking. As I had the privilege to address the SDG Summit on Monday, I want to focus on other equally important topics today.

We have learned from the past mistakes. We have seen horrors and grave human suffering. We do not want to end up in situations that rhyme with barbarity and cruelty. Humankind does not deserve war, death, aggression and suppression. That is why sovereign states gathered 78 years ago and formed the United Nations.

United Nations is really uniting nations. We have been trying to build a world where the ones in need should be noticed and helped. We have learned to hear and accept various voices. We have been shaping a world that is based on freedom, justice and rules.

But this world is in danger. Regrettably we see attempts to bend the rules. Or even ignore and forget them.

We have witnessed ethnic cleansing against the Tigrayan population in Western Tigray resulted in many deaths, sexual violence, mass detention, and the forced displacement of thousands. We have heard the painful stories of slavery and murders of the Yazidi girls. Hundreds of thousands have been killed in the Yemen War. The humanitarian crisis is devastating – famine, diseases are raging on. There are numerous violations of human rights and international humanitarian law. In Afghanistan girls are denied their basic human rights – education. Would you accept this faith for your daughter? Iranian population has lived for decades with severe limitations of fundamental rights. UN Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights stated last year that there are „serious human rights violations“ against Muslim minorities in Xinjiang region. And there are massive restrictions of fundamental rights of people in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea.

These are not merely statistics, abstract passages in annual reports but real and utterly tragic stories happening to our fellow citizens, to people like us.

Like Anna, who worked in a shop in Kyiv. When war started she remembers constant running – to different shelters. To schools, churches, houses nearby. Bombs were falling constantly and one could only hope that explosions would stop. Shelters were overcrowded – small babies, older men and women, cats, dogs. Everybody where nervous and shops were empty. With her daughter and cat Anna decided to leave her hometown Kyiv that were in flames. Like thousands of others running for their lives Anna took the difficult journey and made it to Estonia. There she enjoys especially the sunsets and is amazed how quiet it is. Sometimes when it thunders, she prays that it would be just a thunder.

Russia escalated its aggression against Ukraine into a full-scale war already more than a year and a half ago. A UN Security Council Permanent Member – Russian Federation – is shamelessly destroying hospitals, kindergartens, grain storages and schools as we speak.

We have to be very clear – Russia invaded another sovereign country using fabricated pretext. The real reason for aggression against Ukraine lies in Russian neo-imperial and neo-colonial aspirations. Russia wants to destroy Ukraine, occupy it and drain its resources to feed the ideology about its greatness. What is there great about colonizing another nation?

The outcome of this war will greatly determine the future world we and our kids are going to live in. Will it be dominated by a brutal use of violence by those who commit crimes and destroy others? Or will we be living in a world where law and order, justice and universally approved rules will prevail? What kind of lessons will we be learning from the Russian aggression? How can we discredit the aggression as a rogue tool of the statecraft for generations to come?

The answer is that Russia's political and military leadership must bear individual criminal responsibility for planning, launching and waging the war of aggression against Ukraine. It is a crime against peace, it is a crime of aggression, it is a leadership crime. Russia misuses its place in the Security Council and tries to convince the world that black is white. But it is not. Lie is always a lie, no matter how nicely it sounds. Votes in the UN General Assembly have proven that there are less and less of those who tend to believe Russian lies.

UN Charter says that the purpose of the UN is to prevent and remove the threats to the peace and the suppression of acts of aggression. Russia has continuously breached this core principle. The fact that Russia is member of the Security Council does not legitimize its actions. Crime is a crime anyway. Therefore, tribunal should be created and if it is based on a suggestion from the General Assembly it would have desired international legitimacy.

If we let the impunity to prevail, we put our own virtues and values, our moral norms under question mark. The whole concept of international trial and arbitration will be under threat. This undermines deeply the international law. This is why the international reaction and response to Russian crimes has an existential significance for us all.

Dear ladies and gentlemen,

situation calls us to really use the tools at our disposal for protecting the international law based on the UN Charter.

Therefore, we need to reform the UN Security Council! Now is the time, as the world is out of joint. Now is the time, as it has become more evident than ever.

The Security Council is close to a dead-end, unable to act and make decisions on the biggest conflict in the heart of Europe after the Second World War. This undermines the UN Charter. Granting international peace and security is the *raison d'être* of the Security Council. But instead of that the Council is paralyzed. It has numerous negative implications globally – be it inability to offer conflict resolution or solutions concerning migration and food security. This dangerous tendency doesn't have its foundations in Russian aggression against Ukraine, but it has crystallized because of that.

The world needs a Security Council that is able to fulfill its tasks and live up the expectations of its founding members. But even more so – to give hope for better days to those suffering under fear, oppression and violence. The ones responsible for aggression and conflicts have to face justice. Even those with veto right in the Security Council.

In order to make sure that the Security Council can fulfill the tasks set by the UN Charter, there is no alternative than to adjust the structure and working methods of the

Security Council. And yes, this is possible and we should gather up and rise the voices calling for the Security Council reform.

Of course, it is hard. We are different in our positions. The reform has been on the table for many decades already. But instead of complaining how impossible the Security Council reform will be, let us make an extra effort towards it! We owe it to the starving, physically injured, mentally damaged, homeless boys and girls in Rakhine (Myanmar), Tigray, Syria, Yemen, Ukraine. Whose children will be next?

We need to stick together and protect the international law based on the UN Charter.

If we cannot agree on all the reform ideas, let's concentrate on commonalities, let's make the small steps that we can take already today. We all need to show some flexibility. Both issues – the composition of the Security Council and its working methods have to be seriously addressed. It is time to abandon the well-known and documented group positions. We – as united world community – need to start fresh. Let's turn a blank page and work closely together to make a strong point that enough is enough. For the greater good, it would make a perfect sense to take one step back from the old positions in order to move three steps ahead. Let's keep in mind what is at stake here.

The central issue is of course using the veto right. There should be no veto right if there is a suspicion that the one who uses it may have acted itself against the international law. Estonia supports the proposal of Accountability, Coherence and Transparency group to limit the veto right in case of war crimes, crimes against humanity and crime of aggression.

UN Charter stipulates in Chapter V that “a party to a dispute shall abstain from voting” in the Security Council. We call on the Council to always implement this clause like it was done in the early decades of United Nations. It is unacceptable if the aggressor is using the veto right and the Security Council is unable to act. In fact, there is a way out from letting the Security Council member to misuse its' veto right. Let us use it!

As of the future composition of the Security Council – there should always be a fair distribution between continents and regions. Small, medium and big states should all be represented. Only then we'll have a balanced Council really addressing the world.

In addition – the Security Council should be more transparent and open. That would immensely increase its' efficiency. Building on that belief that the Security Council is able to maintain international peace and security will be restored. The world community has the right to know what were discussed at the Council. If the solution was clearly on the table and there was a Member State who simply just blocked it and by doing that increased the suffering of people, then it should be stated publicly.

In a situation where the Security Council is unable to function as expected, it is definitely a positive development that the General Assembly has gained more prominence and influence on addressing the peace and security issues. We have seen it for example during the process of adopting Ukraine resolutions or implementing initiative concerning veto right. We, in the General Assembly should be able to collectively overcome the veto in the Security Council if the situation requires.

Dear ladies and gentlemen,

the concept of war and peace started to change already during the 19th century. War was gradually seen as the state of confusion or disorientation of mind. It became more and more clear that nobody actually wins from war or gains anything out of it. States started to understand that their national interests are better served in peacetime than in war. Peace generated welfare.

After the World Wars the international community said "never again". United Nations was created to serve this exact purpose. The question we have to ask ourselves is – do we need another world-wide perdition to create a new better world order that is up to its tasks? Or are we wise and willing enough to use the international law to resolve the conflicts to maintain peace and security? Are we heading towards the dark days or the glorious ones?

This is entirely up to us. We are the ones determining the future. We are the ones responsible for it.

But let's start from fixing the Security Council!

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