



CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

REMARKS

H.E. Mikheil Saakashvili, President of Georgia
64th Session of the United Nations General Assembly
New York, September 24, 2009

Mr. President, Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates.

I would like to thank you for the opportunity to address the 64th annual general debate of the United Nations.

Each year we gather here to confront our common challenges and to express our vision for the world we share – the world for which we are common stewards.

And each year we promise to do more – to do better – to live up to and defend the principles enshrined in the UN Charter.

We meet this year on the 20th anniversary of one of the most successful triumphs of those principles.

Twenty years have passed since Europe – and the rest of the world – was liberated from one of the cruelest episodes in modern history.

The fall of the Berlin Wall brought to an end an artificial line that separated nations, divided families, strangled freedom, and imprisoned millions.

Remarkably, that formidable wall crumbled without a single shot being fired.

It yielded to the will of those millions who yearned for liberty and it yielded to the determination of a united West.

Twenty years ago, a universally feared military force was defeated by the force of a universal truth – the call for freedom and the simple desire to live a dignified life.

When the Berlin Wall was dismantled 20 years ago, it did more than free the captive nations of the Warsaw Pact.

It unleashed the hopes, dreams, aspirations and talents of millions of citizens living under the tyranny of the Soviet Union – including my own nation's people.

Today, these citizens make up more than a dozen diverse nations, linked together by common desires and ambitions to live in a world free from spheres of influence – free from external control – able to choose their own destiny.

Today, as we look back at this historic chapter, and the impact it has had on our world, we can rightly be proud of what was achieved – of the tremendous progress made, and the prosperity that a lasting peace has brought.

But if we are to evaluate the past honestly, we must admit our present remains bittersweet.

For there is a real danger that rather than building on this great chapter of idealism and progress, states and leaders will allow a return of the dull complacency and cynical power politics that led to so many of the worst moments of the past 100 years.

And the moment is bittersweet because, regrettably, not everyone drew the same lessons of hope and inspiration when that Wall came down.

Indeed, 20 years ago, when freedom's spirit swept that wall away, few imagined the repression and threats it represented would so soon re-appear, and that the hopes unleashed in 1989 would so quickly founder.

Yet today, a Europe that is whole, free, and at peace remains a goal still to be achieved – a project not yet accomplished, and a challenge, unfortunately, unmet.

Today, I stand before you as the democratically elected leader of a proud and sovereign nation.

But, tragically, Georgia today, like Germany a generation ago, is a nation with a deep wound running through her.

As Vaclav Havel and others leading voices of Europe's conscience declared earlier this week, Europe is today divided by a new wall, built by an outside force – a wall

that runs through the middle of Georgia.

A wall that cuts off one fifth of our territory – a wall that once again divides Europe from itself, creating new lines of repression and fear: artificial dividing lines inside the internationally recognized borders of a European nation.

It may be unpopular – but I am obliged to speak the truth.

And the truth is that this wall's existence mocks the progress we seemed to have made since that bright shining day in Berlin 20 years ago.

This new wall tells us that once again the rule of force has trumped the rule of law – and the rule of reason.

I see no irony – only tragedy - in the fact that this wall is being built by the very people whose ideas were collectively and decisively defeated and rejected just 20 years ago.

I take no comfort that those who thought the Wall's destruction was the single greatest tragedy of the 20th Century now lead these deplorable efforts.

One year ago, my country was invaded: tanks, war planes, warships, bombs and state-directed cyber hackers descended upon our towns, villages, cities, infrastructure, and economy.

Hundreds of our people were killed or wounded. Tens of thousands of innocent civilians were forced to flee in the face of ethnic cleansing that independent human rights organizations have documented.

Today, these acts of brutality have gone unaddressed– in direct contravention of international law, the norms of this institution and internationally signed agreements designed to reverse these wrongs.

These are the facts that confront us as we gather here today. And these facts do have a name: armed aggression, ethnic cleansing, mass violations of human rights, and illegal occupation.

Ladies and gentlemen, those who unleashed war in my region and led ethnic cleansing campaigns in my country – said yesterday in this very hall – that they had to do it to, “implement the principle of indivisibility of security” – in order to, “step over the legacy of the past era”.

The only thing that they stepped over was our sovereign border.

They said they had to do it... As their predecessors had to invade Poland in 1939, Finland in 1940, Hungary in 1956, Czechoslovakia in 1968, and Afghanistan in 1979.

And they had to erase a capital of 400,000 inhabitants – Grozny, to destroy and exterminate the proud Chechen nation and kill tens of thousands of innocent women and children.

Recent history is indeed a powerful guide to understanding what kind of actions these leaders undertake in order to bring what they call "security and stability" to my region.

But I want to say clearly today that the people of Georgia cannot and will not accept a new dividing line in our country. That is an unchangeable commitment.

And the return of a wall across Europe is not just a matter for Georgia. Indeed, the very values of this institution remain at threat.

The protection of human rights, respect for the dignity and equality of all persons, the inadmissibility of ethnic cleansing, and recognition of the inviolability of sovereign borders – all are values that form the bedrock of this institution.

We certainly did not choose this course of action, but it is up to us to recognize and reverse its illegality.

As a community of responsible nations, it is our collective responsibility to uphold international law and insist that borders cannot and will not be changed through the use of force.

It is up to us to tear down this new wall peacefully – with the power of our ideas and the strength of our convictions.

I want the world to understand clearly how we view this new wall and our strategy for

tearing it down.

To start, let me state outright: we do not expect it to disappear overnight. We understand the need for patience. But the history of the Berlin Wall teaches us that patience must not be passive.

The Berlin Wall only fell because passionate, disciplined, energetic partisans of freedom, both behind and outside that wall, worked with focus, discipline, and courage, to remind the world continually of the illegitimacy and illegality of that wall, and to take actions to hasten its demise.

I would like to use this opportunity to thank those member nations at the UN for their vote recognizing the right of return for all who have been displaced— for all the victims of ethnic cleansing.

I would like to thank all those nations across the globe that resisted illegality and pressure by standing firm in their non-recognition of those territories of Georgia now occupied by a foreign force.

I want to thank all those nations who have been so generous in pledging and providing vital economic support that has proved invaluable in helping to build shelters and rebuild the dreams of the invasion's refugees and IDPs.

On behalf of all my fellow citizens, I wish to thank you for your generosity, especially at a time of such extreme hardship around the world.

Beyond the comfort provided by your material support, I want to thank all of Georgia's friends who have defended not only our sovereignty, but our right to forge our own path in the world, to choose our own alliances, and to reject the 19th-century notion of spheres of influence, which led to so much warfare, repression, and hardship in the world's history.

I want to thank those nations and leaders of the European Union who today have committed their monitors to Georgia for the promotion of peace.

The Georgian people are also grateful to US President Obama, for his unyielding words of support for our sovereignty and territorial integrity, and to Vice President Biden, for visiting Georgia this summer and underscoring America's commitment to our democracy and our right to choose our own future.

And in particular, I want to thank the UN for its more than 16 years of contributions to peace on the ground in Georgia through its presence in our country— a presence recently and abruptly halted by the unilateral actions of one single member state.

Our future depends on us.

And so today I also want to report to you on the progress Georgia is making, through our own efforts, in the year since we suffered Europe's first invasion in the post-Cold War era.

One year after losing hundreds of our sons and daughters and after seeing tens of thousands of our people displaced, the Georgian people have regrouped and made real progress down the path of peace, freedom, and individual liberty.

And I would like to pay tribute to their courage.

Just this summer, in a refugee camp outside Tbilisi, I saw young children demonstrating their unstoppable will to have a normal and free life, seizing the opportunity to learn how to compete in the modern age, using new computers, mastering English and advancing their pursuit of knowledge despite the odds.

These children are the future of my country. These children symbolize, ladies and gentlemen, the path Georgia took after the invasion.

We are following through on the promises I made at this podium last year to strengthen our democracy, foster pluralism, and expand individual liberties.

Already, we have set reforms in motion, which within the next year will advance the progress of the Rose Revolution and irreversibly deepen our identity as the freest state in our region.

Already, we permitted nearly three months of opposition protests to proceed unhindered, even though they closed down the main street of our capital, reflecting our deep commitment to pluralism and our respect for dissent and freedom of speech.

Already, we have given opposition-controlled broadcast stations license to transmit across the nation.

Already, we have brought opposition parties into meetings of our national security council, to ensure our security policies reflect the unified will of the nation, beyond faction, beyond party.

Already, we have committed to the direct election of mayors next year and begun the development of new electoral rules, including a consensus chair of our electoral commission, to ensure the greatest possible legitimacy of our democratic processes.

In the next few months we will go even further.

We will adopt new laws to penalize any government official or other outside party from interfering with our judges.

And we will adopt constitutional reforms to transfer power from the presidency to a stronger parliament.

We do this because a vibrant democracy is one of the best ways to topple this new wall.

We are also doing all we can to rebuild our economy.

The Georgian people are skilled and hard-working, but they are bearing the double punishment of a global economic downturn and the economic consequences of last summer's invasion.

Our biggest imperative at home is to create more employment, and we are doing all we can to pursue that goal, every day.

We are heartened that just this month the World Bank named Georgia as the eleventh most attractive country in the world for doing business when only a few years ago we were 122nd.

And we will continue to take steps to strengthen our economy and create more employment.

We are resolutely committed to our vision of a sovereign and unified Georgia.

Together, with all of Georgia's diverse ethnic groups and religions we will prevail over this illegal occupation and reverse this ethnic cleansing.

Abkhazia is the birthplace of our culture and civilization. Starting from Jason and the Argonauts, Abkhazia has been the most valuable and vibrant part of our journey through history.

Abkhazia today has been emptied of more than ¾'s of its population. Gardens and hotels, theaters and restaurants have been replaced by military bases and graveyards.

It will take time, but Abkhazia will once again be what it was: the most wonderful part of Georgia.

Mr. President, Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates, I came here today to deliver this simple message: Georgia is winning the peace.

And here is how you can measure our commitment.

Did we crumble in the face of a brutal invasion? No.

Did we crack down in the face of dissent? No.

Did we reduce freedom in the face of recession? No.

Even in the face of adversity, we continue to contribute to the common goals established by our friends and by the international community at large.

In the battle against climate change, I am proud to say that Georgia is at the vanguard, producing 85 percent of our electricity from green and renewable sources.

We are, meanwhile, on the frontlines of confronting terrorism around the world with our allies, including in Afghanistan where our troops will serve side by side with others from around the world.

We are winning the peace because every day, nations from our region become more and more independent from our common imperial legacy.

Every day, regional states reject more and more the tremendous pressure coming from

our common past.

Every day, the idea that we can resist revanchist tendencies is growing and every day an arc of independent nations - from Belarus to Moldova – Uzbekistan to Mongolia - is telling the world that spheres of influence is a thing of the past.

Georgia, my friends - is not only a country; the new wall that cuts across our territory has transformed Georgia to an idea and a test.

An idea of freedom and independence, and a test for the world. A test the world must not fail.

If the test is successful, then you will be amazed how quickly this region will develop its tremendous potential.

An active, patient victory over this new wall is a crucial step in the effort to build energy security for free nations, and to build a united front against lawlessness and terrorism.

It's a sphere where all cultures, influences, religions, and traditions meet, providing an antidote to the risk of a clash of civilizations.

Yesterday, President Obama said clearly that new walls should not divide us, that the future belongs to those who build and not to those who destroy, that cooperation and values have to prevail against division and cynicism.

I want today to stress how much we share this vision, how much this vision is vital for my country and my region and beyond.

Twenty years ago, the velvet revolutions opened a new era in international relations and a new journey began towards a free and cooperative world.

I am confident we will prevail on that journey, but only if we are not complacent, only if we are not passive. And if we stand by and defend our deeply held values.

After all, the clarion voice of those velvet revolutions two decades ago – the voice of Vaclav Havel – offered us a solemn reminder only this week about the dangers we have yet to overcome.

Speaking of the new wall that now divides Georgia, he wrote, together with other prominent Europeans – and I quote:

“The failure of Western democracies to respond to the dismemberment of a friendly nation, albeit a small one, can have very serious global consequences.

The European Union was built against the temptation of Munich and the iron curtain. It would be utterly disastrous if we were to appear in any way to condone the kind of practices that plunged our continent into war and division for most of the last century.

At stake is nothing less than the fate of the project to which we continue to dedicate our lives: the peaceful and democratic reunification of the European continent.”

We must not fail to hear Vaclav Havel’s call and President Obama’s call – and the call of one my personal heroes from Russia, Anna Politkovskaya, so brutally silenced.

Their calls echo across two decades of progress – a progress that has sparked great hopes, but that remains fragile.

Today and together we must provide answers.

Today and together we must show leadership and vision.

Today and together we must demonstrate uncommon resolve.

And most of all, today and together we must provide an example that the power of our values and ideals – will finally unleash the tremendous human potential within us all.

THANK YOU