

UNGA
September 22nd 2011

Mr President, Your Excellencies, distinguished delegates,

It is both an honor and a profound responsibility to address the 66th Plenary Session of the United Nations General Assembly on behalf of the Georgian people.

The United Nations is the international community's great legacies of the last century, an institution resulting both from history's most outrageous crimes and from humanity's capacity to confront, reckon with, and overcome the consequences of such crimes.

Such human contradictions—"the highest heaven and the deepest abyss," to quote Friedrich Schelling—are symbolized by the two remarkable anniversaries we commemorate this year.

Twenty years ago, the Soviet Union collapsed, freeing captive nations and emancipating oppressed people—unleashing the dreams of millions—putting an end to decades of Cold War and apocalyptic nuclear race — heralding a new era in international relations.

It was clearly not, as one nostalgic leader put it, the "biggest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th Century".

But nor was it—as some analysts and diplomats dreamed—the End of History.

Ten years later—in this city—another major event took place, this time a real catastrophe.

It reminded us—in the most horrific way—that History was not over, and that it remained tragic.

On that terrible day, even those who had failed to pay heed to a decade of grim wars in the Balkans and the Caucasus, in Africa and in Afghanistan, had to abandon their illusions that a new world order free of conflicts had emerged for good.

The attacks on New York and Washington were not aimed at a single country, but instead targeted a set of values and a way of life, freedom and democracy.

September 11th reminded us that the world remains a battlefield.

A battlefield not among religions or nations—but a battlefield within every religion, every nation and every culture—a battlefield between those who try to build and those who seek to destroy—between those who choose freedom and those who pledge to eradicate it, a battlefield between nihilism and the very idea of civilization.

And 10 years later, the remarkable upheavals in the Arab world have offered us yet more proof that there is no End to History—nor is there a clash of civilizations.

Instead, a universal call to freedom is rising even in places where some doubted it could. Yet it is being met by a monstrous effort to quell it.

As we speak, the “highest heaven” and the “deepest abyss” are once again in conflict, and it is our duty as world leaders to weigh in and speak out, to decide and to act.

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Ladies and gentlemen, distinguished delegates,

The first anniversary I evoked earlier —the fall of Soviet tyranny—continues to reverberate today in important ways.

When that moment came, 20 years ago, for us, the former subjects of the Soviet bureaucracy—students, artists, dissidents, workers, men and women, old and young—it was hardly the end of History, but on the contrary, it was a new beginning of History.

Communism had frozen our will in a cold and closed museum.

When it collapsed, the doors of History swung open again.

We found ourselves confronted at once by both the best and the worst.

The best transpired for those nations quickly integrated into the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

The others—like the people of my country, Georgia—were left to the mercy of failed states, civil unrest, wars, ethnic cleansing, and foreign occupation.

Two years ago, from this very podium, I suggested that there were two ways to leave communism behind and to re-enter History—there are the way of Vaclav Havel and the way of Slobodan Milosevic; the way of liberal democracy and tolerance on one side, the way of authoritarianism and ethnic nationalism on the other. There are, in other words, men who embrace freedom and men who erect mental and physical walls.

To the latter—who still see the extension of the EU and NATO as a threat—I would like to say that the Cold War ended in December 1991—that they should not be afraid of having democratic neighbors wishing to join the EU and NATO—that there is no hidden agenda or secret plot in Washington or Brussels to undermine their sovereignty.

The Cold War ended 20 years ago and, slowly—too slowly—new rules are emerging. And even these rules are still too rarely applied.

Step by step though, tyrants starts to fear that they could one day be held accountable for their crimes.

There will be – I am convinced - less and less tolerance for the ethnic cleansing and other war crimes that have stained my country, and so many others..

This is the very reason of our existence as the United Nations, is it not?

To make the world a little better, to finally enforce the rules, charters, laws, and principles upon which we all we have agreed.

It is time to understand that the world has changed— that an army, as powerful as it might seem, cannot ultimately deny the will of the people—that a government, as strong as it might look, cannot unilaterally and freely dismember sovereign nations—that we are not in 1938 or in 1968, but in 2011.

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Your Excellencies, distinguished delegates,

As I speak, the Russian Federation militarily occupies 20% of sovereign Georgian territory, in violation of international law and of the August 12, 2008, cease-fire agreement.

As I speak, more than 450,000 IDPs and refugees continue to suffer because they are denied their right—a right reaffirmed over a dozen times by this very house—to return to their homes and villages.

They cannot go back because, in Moscow, a foreign leader has decided that their home is no longer their home.

To such cynicism and brutality, we respond with calls for justice and commitments to peace.

Last year, on November 23rd, I addressed the European Parliament and solemnly pledged that Georgia would never use force to liberate those of its regions currently occupied by the Russian Federation.

Even though the UN charter gives us the authority to do so, we definitively renounced military means to restore our territorial integrity.

The commitment I made before the European Parliament is legally binding, and I have sent relevant letters to the Secretary General of the UN and other international organizations.

It will soon be one year since Georgia renounced the use of force, Ladies and Gentlemen. One year and we still are waiting for Russia's leadership to reciprocate this gesture of peace.

Unfortunately, instead of dialogue, the response we have received has come in the form of a dozen terrorist acts targeting Georgia. Attacks directly organized and supervised by confirmed officers of the Russian secret services.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The Cold War is over, but some leaders have still to realize it and to stop reasoning in terms of spheres of influence, near abroad domination and zero sum games.

The Cold War is over, but embargoes, blackmails and brutal diktats are still used against Ukraine, Moldova or Belarus.

The Cold War is over but even the Baltic States have to face manipulations of their democratic political landscape and neo-colonial games with their minorities.

The Cold War is over, but the old Soviet habit to play on ethnic and religious hatreds is still alive.

It is especially true in the blackhole that North Caucasus has become.

Georgia is responding to these brutal and dangerous policies by opening its borders, inviting people to come and exchange, debate and dialog, by trying to overcome the information blockades and by trying to rebuild the bridges among nations --- these essential bridges that others are systematically destroying.

Georgia is responding to military build-ups with programs to lift children out of poverty through access to modern technologies, with new hotels and new bicycling roads.

Georgia is responding to methods of the past by embracing the promises of the future.

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Mr. President, distinguished delegates,

The end of the Cold War launched an era of opportunity and turbulence, liberating local dynamics in ways both tragic and exultant, and leading to a constant flux in world order.

It has unleashed hatred, ethnic conflict, mass terror, genocide, and many other human calamities.

But it also has generated fantastic emancipations.

Think of the colored revolutions in Eastern Europe, the dazzling development of Asia, the progress of democracy in Africa or, more recently, the Arab Spring—none would have been possible if the Soviet Union still existed as a global player and as a global threat.

Since 1991, history has become more and more unpredictable, swinging violently between “the highest heaven and the deepest abyss” Schelling was referring to.

Indeed: who could have anticipated the global consequences of a desperate act by a 26-years-old Tunisian , Mohamed Bouazizi, in the remote town of Sidi Bouzid?

One poor man, in an unknown place, was denied his rights by an imperious police and—like a distant echo of Jan Palak in front of the Russian tanks in 1968—he immolates himself.

This breathtaking act of despair, ladies and gentlemen, has literally turned the world upside down.

Some dictators are jailed or on the run, regimes considered untouchable have collapsed, new constitutions and orders are being born.

An entire region and culture derogatorily labeled as unfit for democracy has given the world a lesson in freedom.

Such historical eruptions always come as a surprise.

They require from us all this radical “astonishment” that Aristotle considered as the very beginning of philosophy, the first step towards true wisdom — a radical emancipation from our prejudices and dogmas.

Very few predicted the revolutions that swept across Eastern and Central Europe in 1989 or the colored revolutions that followed 15 years later.

And even fewer predicted Tunis, Cairo, Benghazi, and Tripoli.

The popular call for freedom that has shaken the world in 2011 is the best, most definitive answer to the hatred that motivated the attacks against this very city 10 years ago.

When aspiring populations are free to live their lives, practice their trades, raise their children, voice their ideas, and press their grievances, the space for terrorists to recruit, or demagogues to sow ethnic hatred, starts to evaporate.

International police, military and intelligence cooperation in the war against Al Qaeda have been and are still essential in protecting our freedoms over the past decade. I am proud that Georgia has borne more than its share in the international effort in Afghanistan.

I am proud of our soldiers who risk everything in order to defeat the international movement of hatred and I want to pay tribute to those who have died on the battlefield.

I am proud of our police who are engaged in the struggle against nuclear trafficking.

I am proud that Georgia has become a provider, not just a consumer, of international security.

I am proud of all this. But I am also very aware that extremism will not be defeated, terrorism will not be eradicated by military and police means alone.

Terrorism and extremism can be defeated only if freedom, democracy, and prosperity extend their reach in the world.

This is why we welcomed so genuinely the efforts of President Obama and President Roussef in launching the Open Government Initiative.

The world has to respond to the universal call for freedom and justice. And only a coordinated response to this call can guarantee our common long-term security.

Georgia is ready once again to take on more than its share in this international effort.

Our experience of radical post-revolutionary transformation over the past eight years could well be useful for the newly liberated lands.

In 2003, Georgia was a failed state, a dying economy, a country destroyed by corruption and authoritarian structures.

In 2003, a peaceful, popular revolution brought to power a young team of reformists.

From one day to the next, we were in charge of a fragile country—in a hostile geopolitical environment.

We discovered quickly that the slogans, roses, flags, and other tools we used as opposition and civil society leaders would no longer suffice.

We discovered in fact that revolutions are not *only*—not even *mainly*—about the crowds gathered in the streets, that they consist *essentially* in the long and difficult process of reform that follows the uprising.

This is the main challenge that Tunisia, Egypt or Libya now face.

The uplifting images of people celebrating liberation in Tahrir Square, of Libyan citizens dancing in Muammar Gaddafi's palaces, are already in the past.

The success of these revolutions will depend on what happens after the legions of reporters from CNN, BBC and Al Jazeera have left.

This is precisely the moment when our Georgian experience—successes and shortcomings—could prove useful.

Of course we hardly succeeded in everything and we made many mistakes.

But we also have had astonishing results.

In the aftermath of the Rose Revolution, we fired our entire traffic police force. Georgians lived for three months without them. Amazingly, during this very period, crime rates went down dramatically. Why?

Not only because the police was responsible for large parts of our crime rate; but also because there was a shared feeling that our citizens finally had a stake and they were living actors in a very specific moment of our nation's history— a moment when everything seems possible, when values become the basis of politics, when you have the feeling of inventing your own future.

This feeling is the true engine of History and
our best ally against extremists.

But it is a fragile feeling and it has to be nurtured and sustained.

In Georgia, we managed to keep this feeling alive until now by a permanent process of reform with clear benchmarks.

Thanks to radical changes in our police and in all our other bureaucratic structures—and thanks to this widespread feeling among people that they *owned* these transformations—we have made greater progress on Transparency International's Corruption Index since 2003 than any other state in the world.

We have built a highly favorable investment climate based on efficiency, transparency, and the rule of law. As a result, we are now ranked as one of the easiest places in the world to do business, according to the World Bank: 12th in the world and first in Central and Eastern Europe.

The 2011 EBRD survey on countries in transition singles out Georgia as the most successful country in our region in terms of institution building, on par with Baltic States.

There is still a lot to be done, obviously, and we are more committed than ever to pursuing our path of reforms, to continuing to build our democracy—even as the barrels of hostile tanks point at us just 30 kilometers away from our capital.

Of course, the path to efficient democratic government is difficult, but it is the only path.

Of course, people will be impatient and disappointed, but there is no alternative to the success of this call for freedom.

This is why it is so important to support this call and to deter those who want to suppress it.

This is why we supported the NATO-led intervention in Libya at the initiative of France, UK and US.

The very fact that the NTC is now sitting here, in this room, can give hope in the future to all of us.

The very fact that this effort was approved by the UN Security Council has shown that this institution can actually be the essential framework of the defense of human rights.

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Mr. President, distinguished delegates:

The double anniversaries we are marking —the anniversary of the fall of the Soviet Empire, and the anniversary of 9/11—continue to confront us with this central question: How can we ensure that the new spaces that have opened in our world in the past 20 years—thanks to the fall of dictators; thanks to the spread of new technologies—are filled by peace rather than violence; by tolerance rather than extremism; and by freedom rather than new forms of enslavement?

History will judge our generation by how actively we help to answer that question, particularly in a series of pivotal arenas: in what people call abusively “frozen conflicts” in and near my own region; in the many countries in our international community that remain under tyranny’s yoke; and in the places like those Arab States that have achieved a new Spring of freedom, and are starting the difficult work of reforms.

Wael Ghonim, the young Egyptian Google executive who helped connect and mobilize so many of his country's people to stand up for freedom, recently said that the new revolutions, like the one his country experienced, are a little like Wikipedia—they are grand, open projects in which everyone can contribute.

The need for participation applies to us as well. As nation leaders, we can contribute, we must contribute.

Let us rise to that historical imperative. Let us all make our contribution, so that, together, we may avoid the “deepest abyss” and strive instead for “the highest heaven.”

Thank you.