

Mr. President, Excellencies, Distinguished delegates,

It is always a great honor for me to address the annual general assembly of the United Nations.

This Assembly gives us a unique opportunity to debate the key challenges of our world and our time, to identify and confront the problems that our nations are facing.

It is a moment of collective reflexion and it should be a moment of truth.

20 months after the act of despair of a young Tunisian citizen that shook the world so strongly and generated so many hopes all around the globe, many people have doubts.

Some are telling us that the images of liberation and joy seen around the world have been replaced by broken promises, despair and chaos – and that the world was better off when less people were free, that the international system was more stable when less societies were open.

I came here today to tell the opposite. I came here today to make the case for open societies.

After the horrible attack on the US consulate in Benghazi, and the death of Ambassador Chris Stevens, I spoke with the US ambassador in my country. I wanted to present my condolences, to share my sorrow and my support for this unique nation.

And I was struck by what he told me. I was struck by the fact that American diplomats, beyond their pain and their anger, still believed so clearly that the liberation of Libya was fundamentally a good thing.

And just few days ago, the US Ambassador in my country was proven right by the demonstrations of the citizens of Benghazi who stood up against intolerance and disarmed the fundamentalist militias who were responsible of this attack.

I was struck by the bravery and the love for freedom of the people of Benghazi.

I was also struck by the visit last week to the US of Aung San Suu Kyi—the joyous reception America gave her, and her desire to come here to tell her story with serenity and determination—a story of progress toward freedom, in the face of seemingly impossible odds.

Twenty months after the act of despair and the tragic death of Mohammed Bouazizi, there are many who doubt the cause to which Ambassador Stevens gave his life— who doubt the vision of Aung San Suu Kyi, who doubt freedom.

I came here to tell the skeptics that they are wrong..

A free society does not mean a society without problems.

On the contrary, an open society is one where problems are more visible, where arguments are open for all to see, and where government is held accountable.

An open society is a place where improvement is often reached through noisy, painful, and chaotic processes.

Montesquieu wrote it a long time ago that in a country, if everybody agrees with the government and with each other, then you are not in a Republic, you are in a cemetery.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I speak from a personal experience

My own country confronted democracy's challenges once again this past week, when evidence emerged of terrible abuses in our prison system.

The facts were sickening and our responsibility was clear. Our reaction was swift and we did what democracies must do.

We identified and arrested those who were responsible – those who had committed these grave abuses.

Those in charge of the penitentiary system were fired and ministers have resigned.

This is how democracies learn, this is how we improve.

And this is how my own government has overcome errors and challenges in the past to emerge stronger, more effective, and ever more committed to building and institutionalizing an open society.

It is clear: there are no shortcuts to accountability, and no fast-track lines to freedom.

Building and maintaining an open society entails painful learning and significant risk taking.

But the conclusion we must draw – from Georgia to the events in Myanmar is this: these risks are worth taking.

Your Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

I am speaking to you on the eve of a crucial election in my country.

I clearly realize the magnitude of challenges that lie before this body and this troubled world—from the menace of nuclear proliferation, to the global warming and poverty. But today I ask for your attention to the events unfolding in Georgia, because I believe they are part of the broader, global question facing us today - whether the quest for democracy and freedom can and will endure.

I came here to tell you that Georgia will remain an open society. This is the choice of our citizens and there is no alternative to this.

On October 1st, my nation will vote in parliamentary elections.

We look forward to this day – and to the opportunity to renew and strengthen the fundamental social contract that allows citizens to freely judge and choose their leaders.

Georgia has conducted several elections in recent years—— all of which were observed by international observers, all of which were free and fair.

We live in a world where yesterday's accomplishments are never enough – and I have committed that this year's vote will be even more free and fair than previous ones.

And we have taken numerous steps to pursue that goal.

We have increased public funding and free air time on all national channels for ads for all political parties, in addition to what they can buy with their own money.

We have proposed to all national TV channels a “must carry / must offer” requirement, to make sure that all private cable networks broadcast all news-based television and they have accepted this proposal.

We have welcomed the first televised debate in our country's history between Prime-ministerial candidates and heads of candidate-lists.

We initiated a code of conduct to irradicate political intimidation, the use of administrative resources, vote buying, campaign-related violence and any form and shape of hate speech that for so many years was used to promote hatred against ethnic and religious minorities.

Regrettably, not all actors in the Georgian political landscape share these principles and are purposefully working to undermine the legitimacy of Georgia's democratic institutions—how they are perceived at home and in the international community.

Our response to deliberate attempts to short-circuit our democracy is straightforward – democratic, transparent, rule of law based processes will not be compromised.

Not only is this my demand – it is the demand of the people of Georgia.

Georgia is a young democracy and we know that value that comes from partnerships and engagement with the international community.

As in the past, we have once again opened our doors – and invited credible international election monitors to visit our country—from the OSCE, the European Parliament, the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, the United States Congress, and respected international NGOs.

To date the interim reports of almost every election observation mission has consistently underscored - these are the most competitive elections in Georgia's history.

On October 1, notwithstanding significant attempts to undermine this dynamic, the Georgian people will make its decision.

And I am confident that Georgian democracy will prevail – and reject those who seek to close Georgia's doors.

Your Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Georgian democracy will prevail if and only if Georgian elections remain a Georgian process.

Today, at this distinguished forum, I am obligated to draw your attention to externally generated security threats to my country.

The European Union monitoring mission has just announced that Russian forces are presently undertaking illegal military build up in South Ossetia. As we speak, they are bringing offensive weapons and troops inside our internationally recognized borders.

The Russian military has made the extraordinary decision to hold large scale military exercises in the North and the South Caucasus on the eve of our elections.

One cannot imagine a more provocative and irresponsible approach than to mobilize military forces during this crucial moment of any nation's democratic life.

That is why today, I call on all our allies and friends in the international community not to ignore or dismiss these worrisome developments.

And I would like to use this opportunity to ask the world to speak in a unified voice against these threats and support of our sovereign; democratic institutions.

In short, your vigilance and engagement is required to make sure that history does not repeat itself - that 2012 does not become a repeat of 2008 or especially 1921, when our independence was violently terminated.

We appeal to you today because this very institution – the United Nations - was created to protect and defend the integrity of all nations against dangers like this one. To make sure that the world would never be again a lawless ocean where big sharks can eat smaller fish without the world to react.

With your engagement, we can defeat any and all attempts to turn the clock back.

Distinguished delegates,

I am calling on the world to pay attention and send the right signals.

I make this call, knowing what our responsibilities are.

In the face of these threats, our commitment to democracy and transparency is more important than ever. We remember the words of founding father, who said that who sacrifices his freedom for security, does not deserve either.

This is not just our response, this is the best response

Our transformation, and the hostility it has generated among those who feel threatened by freedom has continued to make Georgia a test case for the entire region.



What's at stake in Georgia today is the very idea that democracy can thrive in our part of the world.

Our common legacy from the dark times of soviet union: crime, corruption, domination, intimidation, oppression, cynicism and despair.

Are we condemned to this way of life and this way of govern or being governed?

No! We can, we should and we will all overcome this legacy.

We are doing it in Georgia and it can be done everywhere!

Will we face strong oppositions? Yes. And we are well placed to say that since our country is regularly threatened with destruction. And annihilation precisely because we chose another path, the path of freedom, the path of transparency and accountability, the path of meritocracy and open society.

We know how difficult it is to overcome these forces.

But we know we can overcome them. Sovietism and post-Sovietism is not a fate.

Slavery is not a fate.

Limited sovereignty as Brejnev once defined is not a fate.

We are all free nations, free people, free individuals. And our future depends on us, on what we want and what we do.

There is nothing easy or light in me when I say this. The georgian people know the price of freedom. And still they think their freedom is worth it.

Because with freedom comes development and happiness, true stability and true peace.

Our region will become one day a zone where free people will interact peacefully, where respect will succeed to dismiss...

Powerful voices continue to send the message that democracy, transparency and accountability are not possible– they see these freedom, meritocracy and respect for human rights as fundamentally alien.

Georgia has proven them wrong – just as many of you have in the past.

Our efforts have shown that corruption, intolerance, intimidation, fear and violence are neither cultural nor inevitable.

Advanced democracy is a sign of a mature society. It is not easy to govern.

Dissent, pluralism, and vibrant debate: what are threats to others are strengths to us.

Our view is clear: you cannot gain enduring stability at the expense of liberty and you cannot ensure lasting prosperity by sacrificing individual rights.

These short cuts never succeed in the long-run.

In every culture, in every society; in every corner of the world, people will ultimately demand the right to choose their own future.

Only governments who meet this demand will achieve true stability.

This fundamental contract is not always smooth.

Governments that commit themselves to this process must be prepared for turbulence and disagreement

What is often difficult for elected leaders is beneficial for citizens.

What is challenging for ruling parties is often necessary the state.

In pursuing these goals of freedom and accountability, our common efforts must be governed by the rule of law and a commitment to respect these fundamental principles.

Violence and intimidation can never be legitimized - and a minority can never forcibly impose its views on the will of the majority.

Guns, money, threats, hatred and fear cannot be allowed to hijack the process.

At the same time we recognize a potential threat of a majority trampling the rights and liberties of minority.

We respond to these threats by protecting the right to dissent, we respond by promoting pluralism, we respond by allowing every voice to be heard. And we respond by the law.

I can tell you how difficult this process is, but I can also tell you that no lasting alternative exists.

President,

Ladies and gentlemen,

I want to share with you my hope and my trust.

A few days from now, Georgians from all social, religious and ethnic backgrounds will collectively decide their future.

They will express diverse opinions and wishes, and a new future for our nation will emerge.

Openness will be further enshrined, transparency will be strengthened, and public accountability confirmed.

By constantly renewing the social contract that is at the heart of every democratic nation, we will prove that democratic principles and practices are here for good.

I trust the Georgian people.

I stated earlier that democracy is a difficult, sometimes noisy system. It presents challenges to those in and outside government.

And it forces leaders to place their trust in society.

Personally, I see no credible alternative – and I saw no better reason to take risks.

Fear is the paramount characteristic of autocrats, while trust is a definition of democrats.

Let us all trust our citizens.

Let us defend the institutions that support, strengthen and preserve our choice to be open and free.

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