

**Address by the President of the Republic of Estonia Alar Karis
at the 79th United Nations General Assembly
24 September 2024**

Mr President,

Mr Secretary General,

Excellences,

Dear ladies and gentlemen,

I want to live in a world that is in Peace. In a world that is not destroying itself. Where proud sovereign nations, big or small, old or young, modern or traditional are not conquered and colonized. In a world where everybody can feel free. Where AI serves and not hinders humanity and where nobody has to fear oppression based on gender, race, nation, beliefs or one's thoughts.

I want to live in a world that is fit for freedom. Because freedom paves the way for lasting solutions and prosperity. Because freedom is the core of humanity.

Don't we all want the same? Regrettably peace and freedom are under threat. The latest survey by Freedom House proved that "global freedom declined for the 18th consecutive year in 2023." The number of those countries, where political rights and civil liberties are diminishing is more than twofold in comparison to those where rights, liberties and freedom are improving.

Peace and freedom are words that are unfortunately blatantly misused. Too often we see, how the one promising peace and freedom brings instead suppression and suffering.

The weaker the mechanisms that protect international law, the bigger is the threat to undermine the way most of us want to live.

We may keep condemning the brutal acts of violence. We may even strongly condemn the atrocities, but without efficient acts against violence the history will condemn us. And it will condemn us strongly.

But its not our place in history that we have to worry about. Something else keeps us awake at night. It's the children who are lost to conflicts. Who will be never old enough to see the high school diploma. Who will never have the chance to learn how to ride a bike. Who will never dance in the desert.

Who will not be free, who will not be smiling...

...but, dear ladies and gentlemen,

the happiness of a child is priceless. This image should set our moral compass right. Personal and global, strategic and tactical.

This image will be reality on the shores of Gulf of Aden, Azov Sea, Bay of Bengal, Dead Sea, Caspian Sea, Lake Tanganyka, Yellow Sea or anywhere in the world when the universally shared rules prevail. When the international law is respected. When UN Charter is applied.

Therefore, we have no other option than to act and adjust the UN system so that it could live up to the demands and necessities of the 21st century. It means reinforcing the UN Charter.

Restoring the credibility and reforming the UN should grant better and more efficient application of the Charter so that peace and security is maintained in everyone's interest and everywhere in the world.

The need to reform the UN and its Security Council has been discussed for decades. I am convinced that now more than ever, the renewal and strengthening of the multilateral world order with UN Charter at its core is in the interest of all of us.

Pact for the Future that we adopted at the Summit of the Future just a few days ago is a good start. It is guideline showing us the way forward. Now, we must implement all we have pledged.

We should have been even more ambitious. The future Security Council has to be fit-for-purpose, efficient, transparent, open and accountable with a strengthened decision-making capacity. The Council's composition must adequately reflect the current world. It must also be inclusive in conducting its business to better respond to the current global threats.

But there is no easy formula how to grant it. Otherwise, we would have a balanced, agile and effective Security Council already in place. One thing is certain – and it is acknowledged also by the Pact for the Future – that the scope and use of the veto right has to be limited. Estonia supports all efforts to limit the use of the veto, especially on actions aimed at ending or preventing mass atrocities.

Currently the veto right in the Security Council hands its holder a great power. A power also to put finding the solutions on a standstill. As sometimes that solution might sharply be against the interest of the member of the Security Council itself.

The deadlocks of the Security Council can be measured directly in lost and crippled human lives. This is not right and this is unacceptable.

We believe that all states collectively should have bigger say in maintaining peace and security than one member of the Security Council. Especially in the case of a deadlock in the Security Council.

We cannot restore the credibility of the multilateral system and the UN when a permanent member of the Security Council acts against the principles of the Charter. Therefore, let us use wisely the powers of the General Assembly.

We, in the General Assembly should be able to collectively overcome the veto in the Security Council if the situation requires. Let us analyze the options how the General Assembly could gain more prominence. In addition, I recommend taking this analysis to our capitals, to different conferences around the world, collecting new ideas from the inclusive global debate.

Pact for the Future acknowledges the need for revitalizing the work of General Assembly. Also in connection of strengthening the coordination with Security Council. Among other things it means that the future peace operations would better respond to existing challenges and emerging realities. The preciseness and sharpness of the Pact for Future allows us to believe that the United Nations 2.0 is an idea that is also capable of meeting the current challenges on the ground.

Dear ladies and gentlemen,

the pain of losing a close one is grave. It hurts us no matter where this happens. The life will never be the same after such a tragedy. Russia's aggression against Ukraine causes inhumane suffering.

As does the war in Gaza, or the worsening fighting in Sudan, or the tensions, instability, human rights violations in Sahel, the war in Syria, the unresolved Rohingya crisis, the humanitarian catastrophe in Yemen or the suppression and torture of girls and women in Afghanistan.

Since the horrific terrorist attacks by Hamas against Israel almost a year ago, there has been too much suffering in Gaza and the region. The destruction, loss of life and trauma is unimaginable. It only leads to a vicious cycle of violence and deepening hatred. We believe it is high time for an agreement that would establish a ceasefire and allow for the release of hostages.

Without being naive or blind to regional complexity, Estonia is deeply convinced that the two-state solution is the only way to just and lasting peace. Israelis and Palestinians both deserve to live in a free, sovereign country, within secure and recognized borders. We must step up efforts to achieve this goal.

Dear ladies and gentlemen,

In this very room, the global community has condemned Russia's aggression against Ukraine. Russia has attacked international peace and security and the UN Charter. That's a fact. Confirmed also by the General Assembly. We must also firmly condemn the actions of those who arm Russia in this aggression – Iran and North Korea.

It has been becoming increasingly important not to lose the sight. We can not and we will not accept blurring the „realities on the ground“. Russia's war against Ukraine is as clear as black and white. Russia is the aggressor and Ukraine is the victim. Russian violations against international law are brutal and widely documented. Russia has systematically killed civilians.

Ukrainian children are deported to camps far away from their homes and parents in order to teach how to think correctly.

Unfortunately sending people in the so-called correction camps where they are taught “right” behavioral patterns are not precedent in today's world. It makes me wonder in which century do we actually live in?

What would any of us do if the aggressor, the murderer of our parents, would stand in front of us?

Would we demand justice, accountability and the end of aggressive behavior or would we call the aggressor for a chat to settle misunderstandings between us?

Deplorably the smooth talk about dialogue and importance for Ukraine and Russia to engage in direct peace talks are only supporting Russian cause. Especially when those so-called peace proposals fail to recognize who is the one who has launched the aggression. And who is the one suffering.

We are not going to call Russia for a coffee.

Instead, we call them to accept President Zelenskyy's 10 point peace formula which has wide international support. Russia has to end the aggression, withdraw its troops and military equipment from the territory of Ukraine. Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty must be restored.

We demand Russia to stop cynically and shamelessly exploiting various conflicts to its own advantage. By fueling contradictions in Africa, Europe, America or elsewhere – Russia attacks the coherence of our societies and generates instability.

Misinformation is a widely used weapon for this purpose. We have to act decisively against systematic spread of lies. To succeed in this, we must develop critical thinking and knowledge. Therefore, granting the education globally for everybody is so strategically important.

While drafting the UN resolutions we must consider the new mechanisms that are weaponized and used to undermine international peace and security. The world has changed. Information is rushing in various digital formats and we tend to live in fragmented bubbles.

This can in turn be fertile ground for extremist terrorist groups or for neo-imperial expansionist ambitions. Similarly, refugees are sometimes used for destabilizing actions. Changing world poses new challenges. Let's make sure that that UN methods, agencies and resolutions meet the requirements of 21st century.

Dear ladies and gentlemen,

Last year Estonia proposed the Fit for Freedom agenda that calls for a global discussion. First on how to reinforce multilateralism and international rules-based system with the UN Charter at its core. Second, how to foster inclusive decision-making of all states and societies. And third, how to ensure human rights and freedoms for all.

The central idea of Fit for Freedom is simple – international law must be upheld, the rules must apply. Only then we are all better off. We do not need global cataclysm to build something instead of the UN. We have learnt from the past and we are able to build on the structures of the UN already in place. Most of all it takes political will to succeed.

The possibilities to engage with the work of the Security Council (and its subsidiary organs) should be improved to all the members of the General Assembly. With the distinct help from technology the accountability of the Security Council has to be enhanced.

If the working culture would be more open, hypocrisy and lies would have indeed shorter legs. Promoting new open and swift models to work and administer is the second pillar how we can make the world freer.

This year Estonia chairs the Media Freedom Coalition and next year Freedom Online Coalition. We will build on conviction that fundamental freedoms and human rights should be the mainstream of the international politics. Even more forcefully and consciously than until today.

If the human and fundamental rights are protected then we may conclude that international law and UN Charter are not only maintained, but they are strengthened. When international rules apply to everyone, the world is fit for freedom.

Dear ladies and gentlemen,

positive change is possible. Estonia's own story is a perfect illustration of that. We have built a digital, cyber-secure society where citizens feel that they themselves are the state. As it should be.

We know from our own experience that freedom combined with proper technology and innovation oriented mindset are the best tools for finding long-term solutions. Yes, also free societies, might need some updates from time to time and the latest plug-ins for optimized user friendly performance. But if maintained properly, they are not crashing and freezing like autocracies tend to do.

Estonians have a vivid memory of the times when human rights were denied to us. This makes Estonia vigorous in standing up for those fighting for their rights today. We partner with those who have reached out for a helping hand to enhance children's access to education and medicine. We unite with those who work tirelessly to grant women and girls equal rights with men and boys.

And we are aligned with all who follow the principle of universality and indivisibility of human rights. My country stands for these principles as a candidate for the UN Human Rights Council for 2026-2028.

Dear ladies and gentlemen,

What kind of change are we going to see? We know the answer. It is up to us to fix the UN so that it could safeguard "international peace and security and build a world fit for freedom.

Let's get to work/let's do something about it!