

Address by the President of the Republic of Estonia Alar Karis at the 80th United Nations General Assembly

Ms President,
Mr Secretary General,
Excellences,
Dear ladies and gentlemen,

United Nations is an idea of a better world.

It is an idea that is not an abstract construction nor an empty declaration, but carefully crafted agreement.

A grand agreement that is the basis for current multilateral world order. An agreement designed to protect international peace and foster prosperity. An agreement to ensure free and dignified life for everybody. An agreement that is based on the understanding that destruction and horrors of war must not be repeated.

Unfortunately, the international law based multilateral system, with the UN and its Charter at the core, that was supposed to keep us all safe is increasingly under strain. Its fundamental principles are violated in numerous conflicts across the world. Brutality prevails. We simply cannot let this go on.

We all should be asking what kind of future do we want? Will it be a world dominated by barbaric use of force and violence, where might is always right? Or do we want a peaceful and prosperous world where law and order, justice and universally

agreed rules and principles prevail? This question is relevant for everyone in this room despite of the distance of our own homes from the frontlines in Ukraine, Gaza, Sudan, or the DRC. Multilateral world order based on international law and the principles of the UN Charter must be maintained and strengthened. What our peoples are expecting from us as the world leaders today is to bring back the San Francisco spirit, to preserve peace, and to reinforce the principles of the UN Charter.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine constitutes one of the gravest breaches of international law and the UN Charter since its adoption 80 years ago. Despite repeated calls by the General Assembly to stop the aggression and set the course towards peace, Russia continues its savage assault on the Ukrainian state and nation. Russia's war and its war crimes are undermining the reputation and credibility both of the Security Council and the entire United Nations. This blatant assault on the principles of the Charter is undermining the multilateralism, global peace and security.

Regrettably, as we speak, Russia is targeting Ukrainian kindergartens, schools, hospitals, nurseries with missiles, drones, gliding bombs, mines, shells and bullets. The same Permanent member has been systematically abducting and deporting Ukrainian children, erasing their identity and forcing them into indoctrination. A human suffering in Ukraine has reached unprecedented levels. Only the UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine has documented the death of at least 14000 civilians, including almost 1000 children and for

about 35 000 civilians injured including more than 2000 children. The death toll increases with every year, month, week and day.

In total disregard of President Zelensky agreeing to ceasefire in March, and of the recent peace efforts by the United States, Russia has significantly intensified its campaign of terror with a barrage of drone and missile strikes on civilian targets.

It is evident that Russia has no intention of agreeing to a ceasefire, let alone a lasting peace. In response to recent peace efforts, Russia has instead intensified its campaign of terror with a barrage of drone and missile strikes on civilian targets. Russia's objectives have not changed: they remain the subjugation of all of Ukraine and the reshaping of Europe's security order to satisfy Russia's own neocolonial and imperial ambitions. The increasing violations of neighbouring countries' airspace by Russian drones and missiles are yet another escalation and a stark reminder that Russia's aggression threatens not only Ukraine but the security of the entire region. Hereby I have to regrettably tell you that just weekdays ago, three Russian fighter planes violated Estonian airspace, a hostile act that is part of a pattern of similar recent incidents happening on the European Union's eastern border. Therefore, the only viable way forward towards a ceasefire and just and lasting peace is to increase collective international pressure on Russia to force them to peace in Ukraine and to act in a way that is expected from a Permanent Member of the Security Council.

Let me assure you that my own country, Estonia, will continue to do everything possible to reinforce Ukraine's ability to defend itself in full conformity with the Art 51 of the UN

Charter. Doing so we are defending the sovereign equality of all the Member states, large and small – one of the core principles on which the United Nations was founded. We are also advocating for making Russia accountable for all its crimes in Ukraine, including for the crime of aggression, as we know too well that impunity only leads to new crimes, new suffering and even greater injustice.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The international law based multilateral system has also failed to protect Palestinians and Israelis. Having visited both Israel and Palestine this year, I witnessed firsthand the devastating impact of this long-lasting conflict. Hamas' brutal terrorist attacks on 7 October have been condemned by the whole world. Hamas cannot have any role in the future governance of Gaza and Palestine. It has to be guaranteed that the horrors of terrorism would never be repeated.

However, ordinary people and children in Gaza must not be the ones to pay the price. I am devastated that so many innocent lives, including children's lives have been lost due to military action, starvation and the spread of disease. The promise of international humanitarian law was to ensure that people do not suffer during armed conflict. And yet, what has unfolded in Gaza has crossed all red lines.

Estonia has supported all efforts for a ceasefire that would end the killing, destruction of lives, and bring all the hostages home. In order to alleviate the unbearable humanitarian situation, Israel must fully respect international humanitarian law and implement its commitments regarding access and delivery of humanitarian aid and security of aid workers.

In order to truly end the cycle of violence, we need a comprehensive political process with the end goal of two states – Israel and Palestine – living side by side in peace and security. I commend the efforts of France and Saudi Arabia to step up international action to implement the two-state solution.

Dear Friends,

The United Nations must be capable of fulfilling its core functions. In order to face the multitude of current global challenges, all the pillars of the UN – peace and security, human rights and sustainable development – have to be strengthened. Estonia, therefore, supports an ambitious system-wide reform of the United Nations. This is not only an issue of monetary efficiency and financial discipline - it is a structural problem and a credibility question for the UN. For this reason, we are fully behind the Secretary General in his endeavours in pushing the UN80 reform vigorously forward.

Within this transformation, the reform of the Security Council is of central importance. Estonia supports the expansion of the Security Council membership so that it would include countries that have, *inter alia*, demonstrated their unwavering commitment to the international law and the principles UN Charter, and have consistently acted in accordance with these principles. Furthermore, if we want to have a functional and respected Council, we also need to restrict the use – or rather abuse - of the veto, increase the transparency of the Council's work and its accountability.

Last but not least, we also need to ensure transparency when it comes to the selection of the next Secretary General of the UN. After 80 years of men-only leadership, we are very supportive to the idea that based on a fair process seeking the most

qualified candidate, it is high time for a woman to be chosen as UN Secretary-General. We need to put forward ambitious selection criteria, clear timeline and assure greater role of the General Assembly in this process. Given the current credibility crisis of the UN, we cannot afford to fall short in the selection process.

Dear Ladies and Gentlemen,

Sustainable development with clearly defined goals remains a central focus of the UN. We have to redouble our united efforts to address global challenges like the effects of ongoing climate change, which are getting worse in all parts of the world.

The upcoming COP30 in Brazil should be a turning point. Countries should submit strong climate plans. These plans should cover all parts of the economy and follow the 1.5-degree goal of the Paris Agreement. Substantial progress during this decade is crucial.

We must work together to triple renewable energy production by 2030, because this is the most effective way to reduce emissions. Estonia shows that this is possible. We used to rely on oil shale, a local fossil fuel, for our energy production, but today, nearly 40% of our electricity comes from renewable sources. This change happened because of political will and private investments.

Let us now raise our ambitions together! Like we did when we agreed on a world clean-up day to be acted upon on 20 September at Estonia's initiative and example worldwide. Not to celebrate but to do it!

Dear Colleagues,

In the myriad of challenges we face, accessible education is a prerequisite of understanding the current problems, learning from the mistakes of the past, and crafting a better world.

Estonia's educational system ranks high in many international rankings. We see how this has had an impact to many other fields where Estonia has been doing well – including digital governance, media freedom or innovation.

Our goal is to share with our partners, including through UNICEF board, our diverse experience in innovation in education, developing education policies, reforming education and improving the availability of high-quality education.

Every situation, every culture, every context is unique and requires specifically developed solution. However, allow me to draw your attention to one specific experience of ours.

In 1991, at the start of the internet revolution, we decided to radically integrate computers and internet into our education system. The programme Tiger Leap, which had the aim of opening a computer class in every Estonian school within a year, was a cornerstone of Estonia becoming one of the most digital societies in the world today.

World today looks different from the one 34 years ago. But new technology is there again and waiting to be put into best use. Therefore, Estonia is making a new Leap – the Artificial Intelligence Leap. We are again providing the best technological tools available to our students and teachers so that we keep comparative edge in education for years to come.

Equipping citizens with the skills to use AI wisely and responsibly is essential. AI must serve dignity, development, and human rights – not the other way around.

In Estonia we believe in innovation and we are most ready to develop new tailor-made solutions with our good partners all around the globe. In collaboration with the International Telecommunications Union and Germany, Estonia has co-founded the GovStack initiative. This innovative platform provides governments with digital public infrastructure toolbox aimed at modernizing digital services by creating modular, open-source and scalable framework for governments worldwide.

Dear Member States,

Whichever global problem we approach, we have to build on human rights and basic freedoms. Yet today, human rights and fundamental freedoms are increasingly under pressure worldwide. This is a deeply worrying trend that demands our collective response. This is the idea that guides us also on the way of becoming a member of Human Rights Council for the period of 2026-2028, and I would ask your support at the elections next month. Our priorities during our membership are the promotion and protection of children's rights, safeguarding digital rights and reducing the digital divide, and advancing media freedom. All three are critical for advancing democracy and protecting international law based multilateral world order.

We are capable of learning as human beings and as a mankind. We learn from mistakes. We get up and we'll do better. Let's do it!