

Address by H. E. Toomas Hendrik Ilves  
President of Estonia  
To the 66th Session of the United Nations General Assembly  
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*Check against delivery!*

Mr. President,  
Excellencies,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

The twentieth anniversary this year of the restoration of Estonia's independence, not surprisingly, coincides with our twentieth year of membership in the United Nations and our participation at the General Assembly. Given where we were then, in 1991 – a poor and beleaguered country, brutalized by a half century of thuggish Soviet, then Nazi and then again Soviet occupation – our transformation in one generation to a modern, technologically cutting edge European democracy is a testament to what committed people can do. It is as well a challenge to those who find excuses for not implementing democracy, for not eliminating corruption, for continuing to brutalize their citizens.

Today, twenty years after the bumbling crumbling of that rusty edifice of totalitarianism, the Soviet Union, we again smell in the air the hope of liberty and democracy – this time in the Middle East and Northern Africa. Again people have come together and said “Enough!”. Enough of the lies, the corruption, the 3 A.M knock on the door by the dull-brained goons of the secret police. People want to be able to speak their minds, run their own lives, free of harrassment or worse by the authorities. In a word, people want democracy. They want too the foundations of democracy: respect for human rights, rule of law and freedom of speech and assembly.

With these hopes in the hearts of so many people in this year of otherwise dismal and tawdry news, Estonia welcomes, indeed whole-heartedly encourages the UN to move forward on Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon's decision to focus, during his second term, on democracy and human rights.

Estonia welcomes this decision because frankly, the results of the democracy movements of a generation ago are not even close to what we hoped for at the time. Most of the people that lived under undemocratic rule two decades

ago continue to do so today. Of what was the Soviet Union then, only Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania have earned the designation “Free” in Freedom House’s annual report card on the rule of law, respect for fundamental freedoms and free and fair elections. That, I submit is a poor result.

Each country and each situation is, of course, different. No textbook rules can tell you how to make democracy work or how to build a prosperous society. A few basic tenets and lessons, however, hold across nations, experiences, and cultures. The UN’s own Universal Declaration of Human Rights, a document everyone here is obligated to adhere to, after all, is based on the premise of common truths held by all.

Mr. President,

Democracy, as I said, is not only about voting and free and fair elections, vital as they are for any free and democratic society. Respect for human rights and the rule of law constitute the cornerstones of an open society. If you cannot speak your mind or be guaranteed a fair trial if you are arrested, it matters little that you can go to the polling booth. Rights and freedoms belong to each and every person. They are not the privilege of a select few with the money, the guns or the power.

For Estonia, it is of fundamental importance that the North African and Middle Eastern revolutions have been *popular* reactions to sustained violations of human rights, corruption and injustice. The revolutions confirm the universal aspiration to recognize ones human rights; they show once again, as throughout history, that people naturally want to be free from fear and repression.

Notice, I said people. Not “Men”. Already two and half thousand years ago Aristotle noted that where the state of women is bad “almost half of human life is spoilt.” This is no less true today and will remain so. The ongoing revolutions could not have occurred and cannot succeed without women. It is a profound source of concern for Estonia to notice that while women are welcome to protest against the corrupt regimes, they are not always welcome to participate in the political process.

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Estonia, therefore, places great hopes on the UN's new gender entity, UN Women, and will continue to insist that the UN as a whole, does its part globally standing up for women's rights. We also expect that UN Women will play an active role in helping to turn the principles of the UN Security Council resolution 1325, "Women, Peace and Security" from paper to reality.

For as long as we have lived as a free nation, Estonia has always protected and promoted human rights and fundamental freedoms at home and abroad. Our candidature to the Human Rights Council is a logical consequence of our work, but it is certainly not the culmination as we continue to live up to our national and international obligations.

Once again ongoing events underline the need for us to focus on the protection of civilians from atrocities. Even in the democratic part of my continent, the political project we today call the European Union was a reaction to mass murder and war. The very history of Europe motivates us to take preventive steps to avoid any repetition of such crimes. Therefore it is vital that we develop common practices and the capacity to implement the principle of R2P, better known as responsibility to protect. Protecting civilians from atrocities is not just about "protection". It also means bringing perpetrators of crimes and atrocities against civilians to justice. International law, and in particular the International Criminal Court, and the understanding that justice will be done, no matter how long it takes, are the tools we possess to prevent the worst human rights violations. Rule of law and respect for international law are what will help ravaged and victimized societies regain their dignity and rebuild their communities. The common efforts of the international community, the ICC and its state parties remain a priority for Estonia.

Mr. President,

While focusing on pertinent issues of the present, we must not shy away from addressing unresolved issues of the recent past.

Afghanistan is one of these. Establishing lasting security there remains a key objective. To reach that objective we must focus on assisting Afghan efforts to further develop good governance and the rule of law. Along with human rights, these are crucial elements for a sustainable society. Estonia believes that we must all remain committed as long as necessary to reach this goal.

To this end Estonia will continue to support Afghans, in particular women's and children's access to healthcare and education, through its development co-operation projects.

Georgia is another country that continues to require attention. The 2008 war ended with the violation of Georgian territorial integrity, a fundamental violation of international law that remains unresolved to this day. The fundamental principles of international law must be followed by all members of the international community, not just the small, who have no other recourse. Additionally, we should continue to support the Geneva talks. The UN's involvement is of utmost importance and must continue in the future.

Today here in the UN our attention is focused as well on Israel and Palestine. A viable two-state solution must take into consideration the legitimate concerns of both sides for their well-being, safety and prosperity.

Mr. President,

Another security and human rights related topic is the Internet, especially these days when it has come to play such an important role in democratization, enabling political discussion and mobilizing popular movements.

The Internet has grown beyond all expectations since people began regularly to use it some twenty years ago. Its global, ipso facto cross-border nature allows users the world over access to information and ideas, to communicate with each other and to learn. Estonia firmly believes that states should ensure that their people can freely seek, receive and impart information and ideas, and have access to the Internet. In fact, Estonia believes, in this technological age, unimpeded access to the Internet to be a human right.

A transparent government and administration, a liberal economic environment, and a strong educational system all have contributed to Estonia's success. Estonia's development over the past twenty years is proof that information and communications technology can be a springboard to success for all states. We are willing to continue to share our experience with other countries, especially in increasing transparency and openness in government.

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The Internet, however, poses many dangers as well. Increasingly disruptive cyber threats and attacks that can seriously harm entire communities, indeed cause harm to countless individuals are new danger we face. The large-scale cyber attacks against Estonia in 2007 created among our people a new awareness. The steps Estonia has taken towards a more secure Internet, however, do not restrict our people's freedoms. In fact, Freedom House's global assessment of *Freedom on the Net 2011* rated Estonia the freest in the world, demonstrating that a proper balance between rights and security can be found without compromising either principle.

Mr. President,

We also bear responsibility for the environment we live in. It was no accident that the democratic revolutions of Central and Eastern Europe were accompanied, indeed often instigated by environmental movements. Citizens had become fed up with the totalitarian system's abuse of nature and disregard for human beings. Ignoring the state of its citizens' health and surroundings, the totalitarian state exposed itself to be what it was, a self-serving clique hell bent on maintaining its power no matter what the cost to its people, no matter what pain and suffering ensued.

Today, the challenge we face is global. It is climate change. Estonia's 2010 National Security Concept states that climate change is also a security issue and can have a destabilizing effect. Estonia already has decided to contribute to the fast-track financing of combating climate change. We believe that sustainable development and the green economy need a global approach as exemplified by preparations for the Rio+20 meeting next year.

One already evident consequence of climate change is an increase in the number of people who need clean water and food. Estonia will continue to increase its contribution to the UN's humanitarian system. While the world's humanitarian needs grow, we require increased coordination and strict scrutiny of the real needs of aid recipients. As donor governments we are doubly accountable. First, to those who require assistance. But we are also accountable to our taxpayers for the effective use of every Eurocent. If our taxpayers believe the government is spending tax money unwisely or ineffectively they will vote for a government that cares less for foreign assistance expenditures. In these days of ever greater financial difficulties in donor countries themselves, this is not an observation to be ignored.

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Ladies and gentlemen,

The many times I have addressed the General Assembly I have deliberated on the nature of the United Nations and the need for reform. The UN needs to change as the world around us changes. System-wide coherence, Delivering as One, Revitalization of the General Assembly are steps in the right direction. We welcome these changes yet at the same time Estonia hopes the same spirit will prevail in reform of the Security Council.

If not given a fair and equitable voice, proportional and appropriate to a nations' role in *today's* world, not the world of 1945, we will find that the organization has less and less credibility. I propose we adopt a new attitude of openness to new developments in order to make sure that the UN as a whole can better deliver on the undoubtedly important issues for which it is responsible.

Mr. President,

In conclusion, let me say that history did not end twenty years ago with the re-emergence of democratic nations in Central and Eastern Europe. Nor will History end with the Arab Spring. Democracy, freedom, human rights, rule of law and sustainable development all require constant and consistent support and protection. The world faces challenges, new and old. We face them daily. Today, as we commemorate the victims of the 9/11 terrorist attack ten years ago here in New York, we recognize how much the world has changed since the UN was founded 66 years ago. We must address, we must act upon these new challenges. It is we, the United Nations, who need to keep pace with changes and developments in the world we live in to protect and promote universal values across the globe.

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