

I am often asked – by Finns, by Danes, and by Georgians as well, why it is that Estonia cares so much about Georgia, a place far away from Tallinn with a climate, landscape, and culture very different from our own. Yet we do care. And we care a lot. We care because of what we share, what we have in common.

First and foremost of course is that we are formerly subjugated peoples, subjugated militarily and by the same Empire. We in fact were subjugated a century before you. We share in the nineteenth century an almost simultaneous national renaissance, led by the leading poets and writers of our respective peoples, which paved the way for each of our rebirths as independent countries in 1918.

Like Estonians, Georgians quickly set about doing what a nation does when it is allowed to decide for itself. Your first head of Government Noe Jordania initiated land reform, comprehensive social reforms, all while fighting the Bolsheviks, who as was the case of Estonia, intervened militarily. Jordania and Georgia fared worse than we did: Overthrown by the Bolsheviks in 1921, the Georgian Republic was wiped off the map, as we would be too 19 years later, when a military occupation ended our statehood.

We both lost our independence and to the same dictatorial and bloody regime. I have been to your occupation museum, it is as grim as our occupation museum; these are common points of our fates which we wish no one to share. Yet the Soviet killing fields, the executions, the mass deportations, the people sent to the Gulag for protesting the destruction of their culture... the desecration of our churches, our land and our spirit – these are tribulations that allow us also to understand each other in ways few of Estonia's colleagues in the EU or NATO understand. We both know because we have felt the brutal grip, the sneer and soulless eyes of Homo Sovieticus.

But we know solidarity as well, even from the occupation period. I just read a hand-written letter to my former boss, Mart Laar, from Ahto Lainevool, an Estonian who served as a lieutenant in the Soviet Army in Gudauta in 1956. In March of that year he was ordered to take a squad and liquidate Georgian "nationalists", i.e. civilians. He refused to do so. First he was threatened with being shot; ultimately he was given seven years in the Gulag. For refusing to shoot Georgian civilians.

Yet, my dear friends, we share something far more important than occupation, repression and the Gulag, something that makes it absolutely vital that we – Estonia and Georgia – succeed: We are democracies. Democracies without any adjectival qualifiers, neither “managed” nor “sovereign” democracies, but just democracies, straight and simple. Small countries, small nations, struggling without the benefit of oilfields or natural gas, we have managed to do something our mutual neighbor has not. We have freedom of speech, a free press, free and fair elections. We reformed ourselves, we created vibrant economies. We fought hard to achieve these things. For one, we fought to overcome the soviet legacy of pretending to be paid for pretending to work, we fought against the corruption that destroys a country’s and its people’s soul and belief in a better future.

Were this battle for an open society simply a matter of our doing, we would perhaps be so pre-occupied with our own cause and not notice each other, not notice that another small nation far to the north or far to the south, depending on where you are living. Unfortunately we know all too well that we have not been left to our own devices. We know all too well that our success, our freedom, our democracy and openness is a threat to those who live differently.

It was here in Tbilisi a year ago at a security conference that I suddenly was hit by an insight, which like all insights seems perfectly logical once you think of it, all that you wonder about is why you didn’t think of it before. The insight is that our mutual neighbor has bad relations with all democratic countries on its borders that were once part of the USSR. And it has good relations only with those countries that are undemocratic. Indeed, should a country become democratic, as you did in the Rose Revolution, as Ukraine did two and a half years ago, that is when relations with Russia suddenly become bad. I used to think that Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania were disliked because of something that we did wrong. I realize now it is because we did something right.

I wondered about this paradox, that democracy of Russia’s borders is perceived as a threat while lack of democracy means stability. Why on earth would a country think this way in its foreign relations? Why?

Then I read a brilliant book, *Dangerous Nation*, by Robert Kagan, who several years ago wrote another insightful little book *Power and Paradise*, and is known for saying that Europeans are from Venus and Americans from Mars. *Dangerous Nation* is a history of U.S. foreign policy up to the end of the 19th Century, an arcane topic for 2007 perhaps, but he analyses inter alia the refusal of the American slaveholding states to take in new states. They were opposed because new states joining the U.S. would have to be free states, i.e. slavery would be forbidden.

Why did the southern states fear new, free-states? Because they were afraid that they would be a bad example, that more free states would de-stabilize their own slave-holding societies. Old free states could remain free but no new free states were permitted. The Southern states instead pushed for the U.S. to take in slave-holding countries from the former Spanish empire, thereby continuing the legitimization of a lack of democracy.

Sounds familiar? It should. Why is it that our neighbor respects “old democracies” – France Germany or Finland – for example, but not “new ones”, Poland, for example, or especially those like Estonia, Ukraine or Georgia? Why does it support dictatorial Belarus? It should be clear: our existence, our success gives the lie to the idea that democracy is inappropriate for Russia, that freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of association is for others, that these are exceptional and irrelevant.

Our success is a counter-example to the ideology of “managed” democracy. And as long as we thrive, we will be treated as a threat. At least as long as our neighbor adheres to the “managed democracy” model.

Ladies and Gentlemen, dear friends.

Georgia has since the Rose Revolution embarked on a historic mission to join the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. These two pillars of peace, prosperity and security in the Western democratic world, the EU and NATO, have stringent entrance requirements but they are not impossible. I remember well how as late as 1997 – ten years ago and 7 years before our entering the EU, there were member states opposed to Estonia’s – or Latvia’s and Lithuania’s – membership. In the case of NATO, there were dubious allies as late as 2002, two years before joining the Alliance.

But, as you know, we overcame these doubts. We did it by reforming anyway, even when told that we were not welcome. Our reasoning was that ultimately, if we did everything that would make us just like an EU or NATO country, then the arguments against our membership would be self-serving and geo-political, i.e. against the very principles of those two organizations. And so we reformed. And reformed and reformed and reformed.

It was not easy, real and genuine far-reaching reforms never are. As a politician I can say that real reforms are almost always unpopular in the beginning phase. Understandably so, for who wants to change what one has become used to? The benefits only come later, often long after the governments with the courage to reform have lost office.

Secondly I would like to point out that the processes of joining NATO and the EU are very different. Joining the security organization NATO is like buying a suit or an armour. First you need to be able to pay for it: 2% of your national income must be devoted to defence. Secondly, you need to get into shape so you can fit into the armour. You need to be a democracy, you need civilian control of the military, you need to be able to operate technically as well as militarily with NATO structures and forces.

Joining the EU is a more tedious and in many ways painful process. For you have to replace your entire legal system and in the process learn how to do things in a new "European" way. I liken it to replacing everyone of your bones, except your skull, which protects your brain. You cannot replace every one of your bones and joints at once. Instead you do it step by step: every few months you have yet another old, brittle, osteoporosis-suffering bone replaced with a new titanium bone. You recover from the operation and then you go back to the hospital and undergo another operation and replace another bone. And on it goes until years later you have a new skeleton and you have learned how to walk anew. It is not easy but it is worth it.

Those of you who follow EU matters know that right now the EU is not in an expansive mood. It has hunkered down and in the case of some member states made it very difficult to accept further enlargement. But this will change. It will change when it sees countries it wants to be members. Could we imagine the EU saying No to Norway or Switzerland? Hardly. Thus the goal should be to aim high. To be so good that the EU simply cannot say NO. This was our strategy.

Of course we were not nor are we even now at the level of Switzerland or Norway. But we had a common goal of being good, not allowing the homo sovieticus approach of "we tried our best but it came out as always".

This is why I am convinced Georgia will succeed. For I feel everywhere in this country that same spirit, that same will to make it happen. Here, where one breathes the air of a free Georgia, you can feel the spirit full of hope and determination to make this a shining example of how democracy, prosperity and security are possible here in this far corner of Europe.