

Last night in Berlin, the presidents of the Baltic states, Toomas Hendrik Ilves, Dalia Grybauskaitė and Andris Bērziņš, accepted the Golden Victoria prizes in the European of the Year category awarded by Verband Deutscher Zeitschriftenverleger, a reputable association of German magazine publishers.

This represents acknowledgment for restoring our independence, promoting European values, integrating with Europe and the successful economic and political reforms of the three countries. The President of Germany, Joachim Gauck, who gave an official dinner last night to honour his colleagues, described presidents Ilves, Grybauskaitė and Bērziņš as ambassadors of the idea of Europe.

"As we look at the world now, 25 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, we can say that we chose the right path at the right time; however, we have also been fortunate," said the Estonian Head of State at Publishers' Night 2014, the official gala night for presentation of the award.

"In unison with the other two Baltic states, Poland and several other countries, we proved that history and geography do not represent fate, and despite the brutal totalitarian regime that prevailed for half a century, it is still possible to develop into a democratic country that relies on the principles of a state based on the rule of law and respect for human rights," President Ilves confirmed. He described Estonia as a liberal, democratic country that is characterised by free and fair elections, an independent system of justice, freedom of journalism, a country with the highest level of freedom of Internet in Europe, free markets and a free economy.

"I am grateful to all our people who knew where we wanted to go and were willing to work hard to get us there. This award honours all of those people," emphasised the Estonian Head of State. "Today, Estonia has become a Northern European country that is integrated in the best possible way through its membership of the European Union, NATO, the Schengen area and the euro area. We are also probably the most IT-minded country in Europe. This is not something that just happened or a result of "Western expansion" – an expression that we hear quite often these days. This is an expression of the will of an independent, sovereign nation."

He also thanked all our friends in Europe and elsewhere in the democratic world for supporting the Baltic states during the political and economic reforms, and who eventually welcomed us back to Europe, which we had been a part of but were ripped away from with force.

"Revolution can be exciting or grand, but a lasting freedom requires tough and hard work. For a while it seemed that the course towards democracy was unavoidable. Now we see that this was not true and is not also true either today. We can never take either Europe or democracy for granted," said President Ilves.

According to the President, recent history has forced us to recall that it is easier to get rid of a dictatorship than build up a democratic society where freedom can thrive and develop. European values, which we value and rely upon, are under pressure today; and this pressure is not solely coming from the east, but from within Europe itself.

"This is the situation in Ukraine, Central and Eastern Europe and in all other European countries, both new and old, where the fight to maintain European values continues. This is also represented in attitudes towards minorities, emigrants and human rights," told President Ilves.

"Here, in Berlin, where Europe was divided in half and was later re-connected, we can all say: C ivis Europeus Sum, Ich bin ein Europäer . We are all European now," spoke the Estonian Head of State in ending his address upon accepting the Golden Victoria award.

In the past, 'Golden Victoria' awards have been presented to the President of Germany, Joachim Gauck, to Donald Tusk during his term as the Prime Minister of Poland, and to former Secretaries of State of the Unites States of America, Henry Kissinger and Hans-Dietrich Genscher. This year, it was also presented to the former President of Germany, Roman Herzog, for his life's work.

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