

Dear fellow countrymen,
Dear friends in Latvia and Lithuania,

The six hundred and seventy kilometres long Baltic Way – stretching from Toompea in Tallinn through Freedom Avenue in Rīga to Gediminas Tower in Vilnius – not only united Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania in their longing for freedom, but it also showed our disdain for the secret pacts of the totalitarian regimes that had divided Europe.

I thank everyone who joined the Baltic Way and everyone who organised it. Through that, we overcome our fear and regained our pride and dignity. It was sort of an unarmed uprising, in which our strength and our power lay in our hope and faith that we would be free as nations.

About a million people forming the Baltic Way at a time when the Berlin Wall still separated totalitarian regimes from democratic Europe – that spoke so loudly that no one could fail to hear. The message was: "Now we take back our state and our independence – the independence of which we were robbed by the secret pacts between Stalin's Russia and Hitler's Germany. Now we'll end the spheres of influence that have divided Europe."

75 years ago today, on the 23rd of August in 1939, Moscow and Berlin determined the fate of Estonia – as of Latvia and Lithuania – with the signing of Molotov-Ribbentrop pact. Facing this evil, this outrage and this injustice we were alone. We know what came next.

During the years of restoring our independence Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania were strong allies. This gave more weight to every voice and more visibility to every action in an Eastern Europe where at the time, communist dictators like Ceaușescu, Honecker and Zhivkov were still in power. This also encouraged us to overlook the warnings and appeals occasionally issued to us by democratic countries, to not rock the boat. For them, stability was more important than freedom.

We didn't listen to them. We rocked the boat until we managed to get out of it and regain our freedom.

Now, 25 years later, we have done a great deal to make sure that we never be alone again. As members of the European Union and NATO, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania have the support of the best allies the free world can offer today.

The independence of our three nations is better protected today than at any other time in our history. However, that history and the events in Ukraine in recent months remind us that freedom is not something that we can take for granted. We must work every day to preserve our freedom, right here at home in our Baltic-Nordic region, as well as together with our transatlantic allies. That way our nations will prevail and we will remain free.

We must never again accept dividing Europe into spheres of influence. And yet attempts are being made to do just that – not with us, but with people in Ukraine who once shared our fate. Looking at Ukraine, Moldova or Georgia, we cannot accept that the choices of these countries and their peoples are influenced by a Stalinist foreign policy based on intimidation and violence. Their choice is freedom. Someone just texted me to say that a statue of Lenin had been toppled in Severodonetsk. It is unbelievable that 25 years later there are still statues of Lenin there at all, but thankfully they are being toppled by the wind of change.

Neither will we ever again agree to strike a bargain with the aggressor at the cost of another country's security in the hope that the aggressor will then back off and leave us alone. The lessons of the 20th century should remind Europe of the cost of such appeasements.

Fellow Estonians,

Earlier this month I received a letter from Viljandi County in which a lady named Esta Kūlasalu recalled how she had stood with her family at the Ramsi intersection in Loodi as part of the Baltic Way. She wrote that since then she has lived through good and bad times; that it hasn't always been easy, but she has got by, and she will. She emphasized that she would not swap a single moment of our nation's freedom for days past.

Esta very clearly recalled that the Baltic Way took place when her son Siim was one year and one month old. She also recalled that Estonia regained its independence when her daughter

Kati was one year old, and that the adoption of its own currency coincided with the birth of her daughter Eva.

That story of one family forms part of the bigger story of the restoration of our independence. Everyone has their own chapter to write on its pages. I invite all of you to do so – to contribute to the collection and research programmes of the Estonian National Museum and all of our country's museums that focus on the rebirth of our state and the experiences and memories of its people. Gathering those remembrances together is something we should all do.

Thank you.

Long live Estonia!
Long live Latvia!
Long live Lithuania!

President Toomas Hendrik Ilves on the 25th anniversary of the Baltic Way in Viljandi, 23 August 2014