



# Federal President's Office

**Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier  
at the award ceremony of the International Peace of Westphalia Prize to the  
Baltic States on July 14, 2018 in Münster**

The speech on the Internet: [www.bundespräsident.de](http://www.bundespräsident.de)

When, in the fall of 1648, after five years of tough negotiations, the treaties of the Peace of Westphalia were signed, after confusion in the very last days, even hours, but above all after "thirty miserable years of war", as Schiller puts it, the Venetian envoy Alvise Contarini spoke of a "wonder of the world".

Our generation has the privilege of having experienced a "wonder of the world" of similar proportions, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the end of the division of Europe and the end of the Soviet occupation of large parts of Europe. Many here will remember the television images of November 9, 1989, when GDR citizens crossed the border and shouted "madness" over and over again. And they were right. Who could have imagined such a thing? Those who considered themselves sane only believed in such possibilities - if at all - in the distant future, beyond the horizon set for us contemporaries. Whether miracle or madness - it was an astonishment at an event against all expectations.

But as wonderful as those world moments of 1648 or 1989 may seem, they had their prerequisites. For the peace of Münster and Osnabrück, we must remember the patience and diplomatic skill of the negotiating parties, the renunciation of establishing definitive truths, especially in religious matters, but above all the deep desire for peace, especially among the imperial estates, who had to bear the burden of decades of violence. And for 1989, it is the indomitable love of freedom of the peoples of Central and Eastern Europe, their irrepressible subjugation.

President Grybauskaitė, President Kaljulaid, President Vējonis,

Your states, Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia, to which we are awarding the Peace of Westphalia Prize today, stand out in their hundred-year history since gaining state independence - they stand out in their unbending love of freedom!

They have never accepted subordination to a foreign power, even during the years of occupation. On August 23, 1979, 45 intellectuals from your countries sent the "Baltic Appeal" to the world as an open letter. In it, they demanded independence from the Soviet Union for their nations, based on the peoples' right to self-determination - as early as 1979! Ten years later, on 23 August 1989, courageous new forces organized a 600-kilometre-long human chain from Vilnius via Riga to Tallinn. A million and more people joined hands and sang "Wake up, you Baltic countries!" Choral singing is one of the great passions in the Baltic states - it was a singing revolution.

The human chain of August 23, 1989 is one of the great signs of a new era, an era with more oxygen in the air. With good reason, UNESCO has included selected documents from this "Baltic Way" in the Memory of the World Register.

Fifty years earlier, August 23 had already changed the fortunes of the Baltic countries. August 23, 1939 - I fear that not everyone in Germany remembers this date - is the date of the Hitler-Stalin Pact, in which the two powers pledged neutrality in the event of war. In a secret additional protocol, they had already determined the future zones of influence in the event of what was openly called a "territorial-political reorganization" in those areas that belonged to the Baltic states or Poland. The treaty was the diplomatic opening of the Second World War. The German invasion of Poland took place just eight days later. The preparatory work of Foreign Ministers Ribbentrop and Molotov had given Nazi Germany a free hand to cover the continent with destruction and annihilation. The map of the memorials is a document of the horrific crimes and unimaginable atrocities committed by Nazi Germany in Eastern Europe.

The catastrophe of the war and the genocide of European Jewry by the Germans was not followed by independence and statehood for the Baltic states, but by long decades of Soviet occupation. Thousands and thousands of people were deported from the Baltic states to Siberia. The latter is also still very present in the consciousness of the population today - almost every family was directly or indirectly affected. But the years under Soviet rule, the decades of targeted Russification were not only violence, they were also an attack on the cultural independence of these countries.

For centuries, the Baltic states that we honor today have borne the fate of smaller nations, being regarded by great powers either as a power-political hinterland or as the apron of their claims. Denmark and Sweden, Poland and Russia, Prussia and Germany have struggled for influence in

the long history of this region. This gives us all the more reason to admire the Baltic revolution - especially in its peaceful and democratic character.

I would like to take this opportunity to do so from a very personal perspective. It is one of the privileges of my political career that, as German Foreign Minister, I have traveled a great deal around the world. However, there is no other region in Europe that I have traveled to as often as the Baltic states. This has resulted in political ties, but also private friendships - right up to the special day at the beginning of this year when my wife and I - as friends, we felt - were able to attend the big independence celebration in Vilnius. We were able to experience a self-confident celebration of joy and pride.

I remember another day, also August 23: last year, on one of my first trips as Federal President, I was received as German head of state in Tallinn - on the anniversary of the Hitler-Stalin Pact - and was invited to speak. For a German, this invitation was anything but a matter of course. And so I also felt grateful. As you know, Your Excellencies: In everyday European life, we speak quite naturally of the "big" and the "small" member states, of "big" Germany and the "small" states of the Baltic region. But I must confess: On that August 23, I felt the other way around. As a German, I felt small and stood humbly before the greatness of the Baltic states.

Part of this greatness - both political and moral greatness - is the ability of the people in the Baltic states to look the past in the face without allowing themselves to be banished. They live in the awareness of a dark past, but they do not allow themselves to be imprisoned by this past. They have shown us and the world that they are striving towards a new, better future, and that this better future lies in the European Union.

Europe is the answer to the civilizational catastrophes of the 20th century, to an era of violence and unleashed nationalism. The fact that you and your countries not only preserve the memory of injustice, but are also prepared to reconcile with us Germans, who committed such terrible crimes in your countries, fills us with gratitude - and this gratitude is also reflected in the honor you are receiving here in Münster.

Today, in a situation in which the centrifugal forces within the European Union are growing dangerously, the Baltic states are encouraging examples of European sentiment: perhaps a little more optimistic than we Germans, inspired by the conviction that freedom, independence and the rule of law can be found in the European Union.

For forty years, it was the conviction of all Europeans, the basic idea behind the policy of détente in particular, that borders must not be changed unilaterally and by force. This principle was violated by the annexation of Crimea. We will not recognize this, we cannot recognize this as long as the rule of law is still valid. And that is why we offered and took military means to protect the three Baltic states without hesitation in 2014. I like to remember how we, President Grybauskaitė, visited the German-led NATO camp in Rukla together.

Because if we ask ourselves what makes Europe what it is, we quickly come up with the idea of law. Law contradicts the arbitrariness that so quickly accompanies power. The law protects our freedom. A world that despises law and regularity as weak, idealistic talk becomes an arena of "everyone against everyone else" - an arena in which the big players impose what they want, while the little ones suffer what they must. And they, the small states, therefore appreciate - perhaps more than others - the value of a community of law, they know the importance of alliances and the precious asset of equality between states, large and small, as it underlies the European idea.

Europe as future and necessity: sometimes it almost seems to me that the Baltic states are a good deal ahead of us in terms of the seriousness and vitality of this insight. And this insight is vital in a world in which even a country like Germany will foreseeably be one of the smaller countries on a global scale. In any case, following their newly won independence, the Baltic states have single-mindedly become members of the European Union and NATO. And - and I am particularly grateful for this these days - your citizens are still among their staunch supporters today. They know that We are only strong together. We need each other as partners and friends! That is your and that is our conviction. And our shared hope remains that this will not be forgotten on the other side of the Atlantic either.

Finally, let me come back to the Peace of Westphalia. In its first article, the peace treaty speaks not only of peace, but also of friendship, literally: "true and sincere friendship" between the contracting parties. A medal commemorating the Peace of Westphalia shows two hands holding a flaming heart and two beaked doves below. I admit that this motif may have been used before for a wedding medal and may have had a secondary use here. But the fact that goodwill and friendship also have a stabilizing influence in political life is something we can hold on to - and I, my wife and I have experienced this first-hand in the personal friendships that have grown in your countries and for which we are grateful. And a little more broadly: The fact that the relationship between our countries,

between Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Germany, has become a friendly one, beyond our membership of the European Union and NATO, is one of the happiest developments of recent years. Congratulations on being awarded the Peace of Westphalia Prize and our sincere thanks to the Baltic States. President Grybauskaitė, President Kaljulaid, President Vējonis: We bow with great respect to you, to the citizens of your freedom-loving nations.