



**Speech by Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
at the awarding of the Peace of Westphalia Prize
to the Baltic states
in Münster
on 14 July 2018**

When the Peace of Westphalia had been signed in the autumn of 1648, following five years of protracted negotiations, confusion in the very last days – indeed the very last hours – and above all “thirty miserable years of war”, to quote Schiller, Venetian Envoy Alvise Contarini spoke of a “wonder of the world”.

Our generation has the advantage of having experienced a “wonder of the world” of a similar magnitude, 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 people here will remember the images they saw on television on 9 November 1989, when GDR citizens crossed the border, repeatedly crying out “this is madness!” And they were right. Who could have imagined such a thing? Those who saw themselves as rational beings believed that an event of this kind would only happen in the distant future – if at all. It was not something they expected to see in their own lifetime. Whether people saw it as a miracle or madness, there was sheer amazement at this completely unforeseen event.

However, no matter how wonderful those global moments of 1648 or 1989 may appear, there were prerequisites for them. In the case of the peace of Münster and Osnabrück, these prerequisites included the patience and diplomatic skill of the negotiating parties, the willingness to refrain from laying down absolute truths, not least as regards religious matters, and above all, the profound desire for peace, particularly among the Imperial Estates, which had to bear the burden of the decades-long violence. And in the case of 1989, the prerequisite was the indomitable love of freedom among the peoples of Central and Eastern Europe, their irrepressible resistance against heteronomy and subjugation.

President Grybauskaitė, President Kaljulaid, President Vējonis,

In the century since gaining independence, your countries, Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia, to which we are awarding the Peace of Westphalia Prize today, have stood out – they have stood out for their unwavering love of freedom!

They never accepted subordination to a foreign power, including during the years of occupation. On 23 August 1979, 45 intellectuals from your country sent the Baltic Appeal as an open letter out into the world and called for their nations' independence from the Soviet Union – an independence which they said arose from peoples' right to self-determination. Yes, they sent this appeal as early as 1979! Ten years later, on 23 August 1989, courageous new forces organised a 600-kilometre-long human chain between Vilnius, Tallinn and Riga. Over a million people joined hands and sung "Wake up, you Baltic countries!" Choir-singing is one of the great passions in the Baltic states. This was a Singing Revolution.

The human chain of 23 August 1989 was one of the major signs of a new era – of a time when one could breathe more freely. With good reason, UNESCO has included selected documents from the Baltic Way in its Memory of the World Register.

Once before, 50 years earlier, 23 August had changed the fate of the Baltic states. On 23 August 1939 – I am afraid that not everyone in Germany is still familiar with this date – the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact, in which Germany and the Soviet Union assured each other of mutual neutrality should war break out, was signed. In a secret supplementary protocol, the two countries defined future spheres of influence in the event of – as it was openly called – "territorial and political reorganisation" of the areas belonging to the Baltic states or Poland. This treaty marked the diplomatic start of the Second World War. Just eight days later, Germany invaded Poland. The groundwork laid by Foreign Ministers Ribbentrop and Molotov had given Nazi Germany a free hand to rain destruction and annihilation on the continent. The map of memorial sites is a document of the heinous crimes and inconceivable atrocities perpetrated by Nazi Germany in eastern Europe.

Following the catastrophe of the war and the genocide of European Jews by the Germans, the Baltic people did not experience independence and sovereignty, but instead long decades of Soviet occupation. During this time, many thousands of people were deported from the Baltic states to Siberia. Awareness of these deportations remains high to this day, too. Almost every family was directly or indirectly affected. However, the years under Soviet rule and the decades of deliberate Russification were not only a time of violence, but also an attack on these countries' cultural independence.

For centuries, the Baltic states, to which we are paying tribute today, shared the fate of smaller nations of being regarded by large powers either as a political hinterland or a gateway to greater dominance. Denmark, Sweden, Poland, Russia, Prussia and Germany all fought for influence during this region's long history. This makes the Baltic Revolution, with its peaceful and democratic character, all the more admirable.

I would like to take this opportunity to express my admiration from a very personal point of view. One of the privileges of my political career was that I travelled a lot around the world as German Foreign Minister – and I mean a lot! However, I travelled more often to the Baltic states than to any other European region. This led to political ties, but also to friendships, and culminated in the special day at the start of this year when my wife and I had the honour of attending the huge celebration of independence in Vilnius, where we felt like friends. It was a great privilege for us to experience this self-confident outpouring of joy and pride.

I also remember another day, another 23 August. Last year, during one of my first visits abroad as Federal President, I was received in Tallinn as the Head of State of Germany on the anniversary of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and invited to give a speech. For a German, this invitation was certainly not a matter of course, so I was very grateful to receive it. Excellencies, as you know, in the day to day affairs of the EU, we quite naturally refer to the "large" and the "small" member states, to "large" Germany and the "small" Baltic states. But I must say that I felt it was the other way round on 23 August 2017. As a German, I felt small and humbled by the greatness of the Baltic peoples.

This greatness, which is of both a political and moral nature, includes the willingness and ability of the people in the Baltic states to confront the past without becoming fixated by it. They live in awareness of a dark past, but have not allowed themselves to become captive to it. They have shown us and the world that they aim for a new and better future and that this better future lies in the European Union. Europe is the answer to the all-consuming catastrophe of the 20th century and to an epoch of violence and rampant nationalism. The fact that you and your countries do not seek to harp on this injustice, but instead are willing to strive for reconciliation with us Germans, who committed such terrible crimes in your countries, fills us with gratitude – and this gratitude is also reflected in the tribute being paid to you here in Münster.

Today, in a situation in which the forces driving the European Union apart are dangerously on the rise, the Baltic states are encouraging examples of the European spirit. Perhaps more optimistic

than we Germans, they are inspired by the conviction that they will find freedom, independence and the rule of law in the European Union.

For 40 years, all Europeans firmly believed in the fundamental idea of détente and that borders may not be altered unilaterally or violently. This principle was violated by the annexation of Crimea. We will not recognise this – and nor can we recognise it as long as the rule of law is supposed to mean something. And that is why we did not hesitate to offer and use military means to protect the three Baltic states in 2014. President Grybauskaitė, I have good memories of how we visited the NATO base under German command in Rukla together.

After all, if we ask ourselves what defines Europe, we quickly arrive at the idea of the law. The law counteracts the arbitrariness that can so quickly arise with power. The law protects our freedom. A world that despises the law and a rules-based system as weak and idealistic nonsense becomes an arena where it is everyone for themselves – an arena in which the large achieve what they want, while the small suffer what they must. And that is why they, the smaller countries, value – perhaps more than others – a community of law and know the importance of alliances and the precious asset of equality between nations, both large and small, that is at the very heart of the European idea.

Europe as the future and a necessity – at times, it almost seems to me as if the Baltic states are quite some way ahead of us as regards how seriously and robustly they embrace this view. And this view is essential for survival in a world in which a country like Germany will also be one of the smaller countries on the international stage in the foreseeable future. After regaining independence, the Baltic states lost no time in becoming members of the European Union and NATO. And, something I am particularly grateful for these days, your citizens are among the staunchest supporters of these organisations to this day. You know that we are only strong together. We need each other as partners and friends! That is your firm belief and it is one we share. And it remains our common hope that this will not be forgotten on the other side of the Atlantic either.

Allow me to conclude by returning to the Peace of Westphalia. The first article of the peace treaty does not merely speak of peace, but also of friendship, of – and I quote – “true and sincere friendship” between its signatories. On a medal commemorating the Peace of Westphalia, we see two hands holding a flaming heart and, below them, two doves billing and cooing. I admit that this image may have been used earlier for a wedding medal and then, let’s say, recycled for the treaty, but at any rate we can note that goodwill and friendship also have a stabilising influence in political life – and that is something I, my wife and I, have been privileged to experience at first hand in the friendships we ourselves enjoy with people in your countries and

for which we are very grateful. And to take a somewhat broader view, the fact that relations between our countries, that is, between Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Germany, have become amicable and go beyond our membership of the European Union and NATO is one of the most auspicious developments of recent years. And thus our congratulations on your being awarded the Peace of Westphalia Prize go hand in hand with our sincere gratitude to the Baltic states. President Grybauskaitė, President Kaljulaid, President Vējonis, with the utmost respect, we bow before you and the people of your freedom-loving nations.