



Summer of 1989: MEPs remember the Baltic Way

Twenty years ago this August, two million people joined hands across 600 kilometres and three countries to mark 50 years since the Nazi-Soviet pact delivered Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia into forced Soviet rule. It was part of a series of events that swept the Communist bloc in the summer of 1989 which resulted in the election of Poland's Solidarność movement and the symbolic fall of the Berlin Wall in November. Some MEPs who held hands during the Baltic Way share their memories of those days.

Baltic Way "has not lost its symbolic meaning"

Recently elected **Latvian MEP Sandra Kalniete** was born in Siberia where her family had been deported during the Soviet occupation.

Speaking about the events that took place in the summer of 1989 she told us: "Twenty years later, I am still moved by any mention of the Baltic Way. It has not lost its symbolic meaning. It is a legend today, and it can be compared to Mahatma Ghandi's non-violent opposition."

She went on to say that "may Europe never again be split by the Iron Curtain and may the continent never again be pursued by fear of its neighbours".

Black ribbon to mark pact

The former leader of Lithuania's independence movement turned **MEP Vytautas Landsbergis** spoke of how his country remembers the sad anniversary of the pact. "In Lithuania the International Black Ribbon day reminding of the shameful Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact has been publicly commemorated since 1987."

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Pondering on the importance of the event he added: "The Baltic Way was sending an obvious message of goodwill to the world, namely: we are demanding freedom and will peacefully take it, violence and injustice has to come to an end!"

"Deserves a place in history"

Estonian MEP Tunne Kelam remembers being part of the Baltic chain holding hands with people on the road to the Estonian Parliament - the Toompea. At that point in time he was a key player in the National Independence Party which was the major non-Communist political party in Estonia.

Mr Kelam told us: "In 1989 the Baltic States were occupied by hundred of thousands Soviet soldiers. Considering the conditions, the citizen's initiative to organise a chain of 2 million people is unique. It deserves a place in the history of repressed nations."

Poland, August '89: First non-Communist government

In the summer of 1989 events in Poland were also accelerating the end of Communist rule. Free elections were held in June and on 24 August Solidarność member Tadeusz Mazowiecki became the first non-Communist leader in Central and Eastern Europe since the war.

Story

Outgoing Liberal MEP and former Solidarność press spokesman **Janusz Onyszkiewicz** spoke to us about those events and of the uncertainty over how the Kremlin would then react given the previous 'Brezhnev doctrine' of supporting fellow Communist states: "We had some signals from the Soviet Union, from the pioneers of Glasnost and Perestroika, that this doctrine is not likely to remain in force, but no one was really sure. It was like with the dead lion – everyone around can say it's dead, but someone has to step up and drag its tail to check it."

He went on to elaborate on the consequences of the first non-Communist government for other States behind the Iron curtain: "When Poland rejected Communism, it became clear that soon the question of the status of DDR would arise and that the Berlin Wall would collapse eventually. We were talking about it with Chancellor Helmut Kohl during his visit in Poland in November 1989. Kohl did not believe, but on the next day he had to head back to Germany, because the Wall just had fallen."

A **YouTube film** below of the Baltic Way shows people linking hands across the Baltic States in 1989.