



THE
BALTIC
WAY

Researchers of Europe's past often refer to the year 1989 as an *annus mirabilis*, or year of miracles, a year in which Václav Havel became the President of Czechoslovakia, the Solidarity movement celebrated victory in the Polish elections, Nicolae Ceausescu's regime collapsed in Romania, the Berlin Wall came down and many other important things happened—including, of course, the Baltic Way.

The organisers of this campaign set themselves the goal of connecting the three Baltic capitals of Vilnius, Riga and Tallinn in a living 650-kilometre chain on August 23, a defiant act intended to commemorate and to condemn the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, the non-aggression agreement between Nazi Germany and the USSR signed exactly 50 years to the day before, whose secret protocols divided Central and Eastern Europe in two. The Pact and its protocols paved the way for the inevitability of the Second World War, and, thus, determined the fate of tens of millions of people. An equally important goal of the organisers



of the Baltic Way was a desire to show the world the unity of the Baltic nations in their quest to regain independence and to return to the community of the free European states.

The immense scale of the Baltic Way (about two million people participated in it) created an indisputable argument that the people of the three Baltic States were firmly committed to their own independence. The campaign also revealed that the recently established Sąjūdis reform movement in Lithuania and its counterparts in Latvia and Estonia (People's Fronts) had mastered the methods of peaceful political struggle and had equipped themselves with a legitimate political programme that sought to return to the community of free European states and set out what needed to be done there and then.





650 km

line of people connecting Lithuania,
Latvia and Estonia



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A significant part of the European political elite at the time was sceptical about the withdrawal of the three Baltic republics from the USSR. However, the Baltic Way showed the unequivocal determination of the Baltic people, while at the same time inspiring other nations to fight for their own individual freedoms and to help unite Europe.

Thus, it can be said that the Baltic Way was one of the most significant contributions made by Lithuania and its two Baltic neighbours to the 20th-century tradition of peaceful battles for freedom and democracy, not only in the West, but also around the world. Armed with this knowledge, it should come as no surprise that after assessing the significance of the Baltic States in the long history of the Baltic States and its influence on the cultural development of Europe and the world in general, this unique event was included in the international register of the UNESCO Memory of the World Programme.



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About

10 tons

of flowers flew by AN-2 pilots were scattered
all over the Baltic route

The Baltic Way is an extremely important part of living memory, inspiring Lithuania and many of its European neighbours towards new and significant civic initiatives.

Today, historians already recognise the echo of the Baltic Way in other countries around the world:

in 1990, a living chain was organised in Ukraine, symbolising the unity of the eastern and western regions of the country;

in 2004, two million people in Taiwan joined a 500-kilometre-long live chain in protest against communist China's threats to take Taiwan by force in a declaration of their wish to be independent;

in 2013, the people of the Catalan region of Spain joined hands and formed a 400-kilometre chain, calling the campaign 'The Catalan Way Towards Independence';

in 2019, public demonstrations took place on the streets of Hong Kong, during which the inhabitants of this semi-autonomous city expressed their disagreement with China's anti-democratic actions.





On August 23, 2020, the so-called 'Freedom Way Vilnius-Belarus' stretched from Vilnius Cathedral to the Belarusian border.



Photos:

Cover Photo: As Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia commemorate the 25th anniversary of the Baltic Way, the Gediminas Tower in Vilnius is surrounded by national flags of the three nations. Photo: Andrius Ufartas (Fotobankas)

1. The year 1989. It took about 75,000 cars or 10,000 small PAZ buses to bring all the people to the protest. Photo: Kęstutis Vanagas
2. Riga, August 23, 1989. The Baltic Way stretched from Vilnius to Tallinn. Photo: Romas Jurgaitis (ELTA)
3. The year 1989. The Baltic Way, uniting people and states for the sake of freedom. Photo: Kęstutis Vanagas
4. September 23, 1989. All flights have been banned. The only hope is the radio and... the AN-2 aircraft that defied the ban. Photo: Kęstutis Vanagas
5. The year 1989. Crosses, wayside shrines, monuments and other memorials dedicated to the Baltic Way were unveiled. The photograph shows new monuments being erected (the cross of the folk artist Juozapas Jakštas) when commemorating the anniversary of the Baltic Way. Photo by Kęstutis Vanagas.
6. The year 1989. Thousands of gladioli were brought from all over Lithuania. Photo: Kęstutis Vanagas
7. The year 1989. The tragic consequences of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact were reflected in the inner concentration and determination of the people. Photo: Kęstutis Vanagas
8. The year 1989. The Baltic Way was a peaceful but very concrete action. People stood with their backs turned to the East and their faces directed towards the West. Nobody needed any words to understand what this meant. Photo: Kęstutis Vanagas
9. Vilnius, August 23, 2020. The participants of the Freedom Way gather in their respective places between Vilnius' Cathedral Square and the Medininkai Memorial on the Belarusian border. Photo: Irmantas Gėlūnas (Fotobankas)
10. August 23, 2020 The Freedom Way in support of Belarus. Photo: Kęstutis Vanagas
11. Twentieth anniversary of the Baltic Way. Tadas Gutauskas' sculpture Freedom Way, made from 20,000 bricks embossed with the names of the participants on them. Photo: Kęstutis Vanagas

Back photo: In Vilnius' Cathedral Square, the unity of the Baltic Way is commemorated with a tile marked with the footprints of an unknown participant in the protest. Photo: Kęstutis Vanagas

How does one travel along the Baltic Way these days? What's important about the Baltic Way is that, first and foremost, it's the people who created it and participated in it, and not the road itself. Meeting these people, visiting their wayside shrines and other objects is the best way to feel the spirit of what was the Baltic Way. After all, it wasn't just a matter of standing in the road back then—it could have cost lives. Who were the people who initiated the campaign and took a huge risk? How did they create such a phenomenon in an age before mobile phones, the internet and social media? Once again we discovered how important it is to find the answers to these questions when we began looking for the heroes of the Baltic Way, and realised that due to their increasing ages, there's less and less time to hear the answers from their own lips. If you're not in a position to talk to one of them personally, travel and find out more about the Baltic Way in the virtual world.



Virtual route -
the Baltic way