

Statement by First Vice-President Timmermans and Commissioner Jourová ahead of the Europe-Wide Day of Remembrance for the victims of all totalitarian and authoritarian regimes

“Every 23 August, we honour the memory of the millions of victims of all totalitarian regimes.

The signature of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union on this day in 1939 opened a dark chapter in European history. A time during which citizens were neither free to make their own decisions nor had a say on political choices. A Europe in which freedom and democracy were not more than a dream.

Tens of millions of victims were deported, tortured and murdered under totalitarian regimes in Europe. Because of this cruelty, lack of freedom and disrespect for fundamental rights, in parts of Europe several generations never had the chance to enjoy freedom and democracy.

This year we also mark the 30 years of events in 1989 when citizens of Central and Eastern Europe stood up and broke through the Iron Curtain and accelerated its fall. The courageous actions of citizens brought back freedom and democracy to all of Europe.

They helped overcome divisions and unify Europe. This then is a collective European legacy that we all must cherish, nourish, and defend.

80 years have now passed since 1939 and the generation that has witnessed the scourge of totalitarianism is almost no longer with us; living history is turning into written history. We must therefore keep those memories alive to inspire and guide new generations in defending fundamental rights, the rule of law and democracy. It is what makes us who we are. We firmly stand together against totalitarian and authoritarian regimes of all kinds. A Free Europe is not a given but a choice, every day.”

Background

On 23 August 1939, Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union signed the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact which divided Central and Eastern Europe and led to the violation of fundamental rights for tens of millions of people during one of the darkest periods of our continent's history. Even after the end of World War II, many Europeans continued for decades to suffer under totalitarian regimes.

The Baltic Way demonstration took place on 23 August 1989, coinciding with

the 50th anniversary of the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. The Baltic citizens formed a 600 kilometre human chain all the way through Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. It was a peaceful demonstration that united the three countries in their drive for freedom.

This year also marks the 30th anniversary of the Pan-European Picnic, a peace demonstration event that took place on 19 August 1989 in Sopron, a city near Hungary's border with Austria. Citizens gathered around the border fence to show solidarity and friendship in an event organised by the authorities of both countries. The Pan-European Picnic is one of the events on 1989 that paved the way to unification and the end of the Iron Curtain.

For More Information

Video: [First Vice-President Frans Timmermans on our common values](#)