

Dear honourees of the John McCain Freedom Award,

Honourable Senators,

Dear Daniel Twining and the IRI team,

Distinguished audience,

I was 14 in August 1989, when two million Lithuanians, Latvians, and Estonians joined hands in a human chain – the Baltic Way – to show the world that our nations would not rest until we regained freedom.

In November the same year, the Berlin wall fell. Several months later, Lithuania declared independence. 14 people sacrificed their lives for our freedom in January 1991. Seven were killed guarding our border half a year later. But Lithuania restored and defended its independence.

As a teenager, I couldn't possibly comprehend the responsibility weighing upon those who led our nation to freedom.

But I could grasp the magnitude of the moment. I knew I saw my state being reborn.

I remember a sea of Lithuanian flags and the smiling, happy faces of the people declaring an end to the regime before it was actually taken down.

I remember the uncertainty and the resolve. The fear and the fearlessness. The overwhelming power of a peaceful crowd. The mourning of lives sacrificed. And a magical sense of freedom.

Freedom that was possible to regain because of the bravery of the Lithuanian people. But also because the world did not turn a blind eye on our struggle. Because the nations and governments of the free world were there for us when we needed to be seen, heard, and supported.

Many years have passed.

Last year, Lithuania celebrated the 30th anniversary of the restored independence.

While the Belarusian nation was once again deprived of its basic right – to cast their votes in the elections and actually have them counted.

The legendary patience of Belarusians had worn thin. Hundreds of thousands flooded the streets to demand a change.

They raised their flags, and their heads. And the free, independent political nation of Belarus has been reborn.

Tens of thousands of people in Lithuania joined hands again in a Freedom way to support Belarusians in their struggle. To remind everyone of the miracle at the Baltic Sea and encourage the people of Belarus to create a miracle of their own.

The miracle has not happened, yet. The iron curtain that we believed had been torn apart decades ago, once again, fell on the Belarusians with all its intolerable weight and cruelty.

They have been beaten, imprisoned, expelled from universities, and fired from their jobs. Some have died for not willing to be humble, obedient, and conformist anymore. Free media and the civil society organisations have been wiped out. Tens of thousands of Belarusians have been exiled.

The streets have been forcefully emptied of crowds. But the suffering of the Belarusian people continues. And today they need support of the democratic world more than ever.

Lithuania is part of that democratic world now. And I'm proud that thousands of Belarusians have found a home away from home in our country. I hope they will return to a free and democratic Belarus, soon.

I'm proud to be part of the nation that had stood with the people of Belarus long before August 2020. And stands with them today. Not because it's the government policy.

But because when Lithuanians look at the people who fight for democracy and freedom now, we see ourselves, thirty years ago. We remember how we needed to be seen, heard, and not left alone.

And as we managed to make our leap to the side of democracy and freedom – it's our turn to give back, to extend a supporting hand to those who seek it.

Be they in our neighbourhood in Belarus, Russia, Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, or Armenia – or in a distant Hongkong or Taiwan.

Because freedom is in our DNA, and I hope that will never change.

Thank you for honouring Lithuania and its people tonight. I am grateful to IRI for supporting Lithuania when we needed it most. I admire your continued efforts to promote freedom and democracy around the globe. I regret not being able to be with you today, but I look forward to working together.

Thank you.