



## European Commission - Speech [Check Against Delivery]



### **Statement of President von der Leyen on the 30th anniversary of Freedom Defenders Day in Lithuania**

Brussels, 13 January 2021

Ladies and Gentlemen,

30 years ago, Soviet tanks and military vehicles rolled into Vilnius. There, thousands of demonstrators were gathering near the TV-Tower. A peaceful crowd, with people from all walks of life, who had come to their capital from all parts of their country. They wanted to defend Lithuania's newly won independence. These were ordinary citizens, who strove for self-determination instead of foreign rule. Citizens, who wanted to take their future in their own hands.

In the early hours of January 13th Soviet soldiers opened fire. Military vehicles drove straight through the lines of peaceful demonstrators. In this cold winter night 30 years ago, 14 people lost their lives. And more than 700 were injured.

Today people all over Lithuania light bonfires and candles like the Freedom Defenders did 30 years ago. To honour their bravery. To honour their sacrifice. This is why today, like so many of you, I wear this little blue pin, resembling the forget-me-not flower.

The sacrifice of the freedom defenders reminds us how precious the fundamental values of our Union are. Liberty, Democracy, Rule of law, Freedom of Expression, and the right of each country to independently choose its future: In Europe, we too often take these fundamental values for granted. But the truth is: To keep them alive, we have to fight for them every single day.

Our Union owes Lithuania's Freedom Defenders. Because today's Europe would look different without their bravery. The events of January 1991 played a decisive role in overcoming the division of our continent. At the time, resistance against the Soviet Union almost seemed like a hopeless gesture. But what happened that night in Vilnius reverberated all over the world. The events caused shock waves that in the end shattered the Soviet Empire.

Today Lithuania is a proud member of the European Union. And what a success story this is! As a member of the Euro and of Schengen Lithuania is at the heart of European cooperation.

From accession in 2004 until now, living standards have risen dramatically. And Lithuanians are optimistic about the future of the European Union.

For me, this is the best way, to hold up the Freedom Defenders' legacy: To be a proud and vital part of a Union, that defends the values, that were so dear to their hearts.

Let's celebrate freedom!

Thank you!

SPEECH/21/106

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