

The 2015 Sakharov Prize

Established in 1988 by the European Parliament, the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought is awarded each year in December to individuals or organisations for their outstanding achievements in upholding human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Significance and award procedure

The promotion of human rights and fundamental freedoms is a top [priority](#) of the European Parliament. On most Thursday afternoons of its Strasbourg plenary sessions, it debates violations of human rights across the world. Among Parliament's initiatives in support of human rights, the Sakharov Prize holds a distinctive place. [Created](#) through a resolution of 13 December 1985, it bears the name of prominent Soviet-era dissident, Andrei Sakharov, joint inventor of the Soviet hydrogen bomb, 1975 Physics Nobel Prize-winner and campaigner for human rights and nuclear disarmament in the Soviet Union. The prize was named after Sakharov in recognition of his courageous defence of human rights, among them the freedom of thought and expression, to the detriment of his professional career and personal freedom.

Initially, the intention was to grant the Sakharov Prize to works or studies in the field of human rights, but the criteria were subsequently amended to include notable activities or achievements in the same domain too. In July 1988, Parliament's enlarged Bureau adopted the statute for the prize, and later that year it was awarded for the first time to [Nelson Mandela](#), and (posthumously) to Soviet dissident [Anatoli Marchenko](#). According to [the new statute](#) adopted in May 2003, the prize is awarded for a specific achievement (meaning any intellectual or artistic composition, or active work) in one of the following fields: defence of human rights and fundamental freedoms, particularly the right to free expression; safeguarding the rights of minorities; respect for international law; development of democracy and implementation of the rule of law. Nominations can be made by political groups or by at least 40 Members by September of each year. Individual Members can support only one nominee.

2015 prize timetable

Each year, the prize timetable is adopted by Parliament's Conference of Presidents in June or July. This year, on 28 September, nominations were formally [submitted](#) during a joint meeting of the Foreign Affairs (AFET) and Development (DEVE) Committees and the Human Rights Subcommittee in Brussels. On 15 October 2015, AFET and DEVE are due to shortlist three finalists by means of a joint vote. On 29 October 2015, the Conference of Presidents will consider the shortlist and choose the winner(s) of the 2015 Sakharov Prize. The winner(s) will be invited to the December plenary session in Strasbourg, and there meet with the AFET and DEVE Committees and with the political groups. On Wednesday 16 December 2015, the award ceremony will take place during the plenary session.

The Sakharov Prize Network

In 2008, the [Sakharov Prize Network](#) was launched to increase EP action in the human-rights field, support laureates and enhance contact among them and with Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) and civil society. It aims to focus attention on human-rights violations in laureates' countries, providing them with an official channel for communication with Parliament. Sakharov conferences are organised twice per year in different EU Member States with laureates, MEPs, national parliament members and civil society.

Impact of the prize

The Sakharov Prize has acquired a strong reputation and its annual award receives a lot of international media attention. According to a [study](#) commissioned by Parliament in 2013, the prize has had a considerable impact on individual laureates and their organisations, providing them with **moral and psychological support**, ensuring, where possible, **their physical security**, helping them attain **visibility and recognition** in

their country and abroad, providing them with **access to the international community** and **empowering** them to continue or expand the range of their activities through its financial award. In their home countries, laureates have sometimes been confronted with negative attitudes; depending on the nature of the political regime, information on the award of the prize has sometimes been restricted and there have even been defamation campaigns launched against laureates.

2015 nominees

Nominated by the S&D, ECR and the Greens/EFA political groups is Saudi Arabian blogger, [Raif Badawi](#). Created in 2008, his website 'Free Saudi Liberals' was shut down by the Saudi authorities in 2012, following his arrest. In 2014, Badawi was [sentenced](#) to 10 years in prison, 1 000 lashes and a hefty fine for insulting Islam (his site hosted material criticising senior religious figures and a Saudi university). In his [writings](#), published online and later collected in a [book](#), '1000 Lashes, Because I Say What I Think', Raif Badawi advocates liberal Islam, freedom of thought and expression, and separation of state and religion.

The EPP and two ALDE MEPs nominated Venezuela's political prisoners and its democratic opposition, Mesa de la Unidad Democrática, for standing up against the national regime's [harsh](#) treatment of public dissent. Currently there are [78](#) political [prisoners](#) in Venezuela, most of them imprisoned in inhumane [conditions](#); 31 of them were detained for protesting against the government. The most prominent among them include opposition leader Leopoldo López, a charismatic figure seen by some as [controversial](#), arrested for his alleged involvement in the 2014 protests. He was [sentenced](#) in 2015 to 13 years and 9 months in prison in a trial criticised for serious flaws which [showcased](#) the judiciary's lack of independence. Caracas Mayor, Antonio Ledezma was arrested in February 2015 on [accusations](#) – never substantiated – that he was plotting a coup, and he is [currently](#) under house arrest awaiting trial. Daniel Ceballos, another mayor, was arrested in March 2014 and [sentenced](#) to 12 months in prison for not clearing street barricades erected by protesters. He has been under [house arrest](#) since August 2015.

The EFDD nominated [Edna Adan Ismail](#), a Somali [activist](#) fighting against female genital mutilation. Ex-foreign minister in the self-declared state of [Somaliland](#), she now runs a maternity [hospital](#) in Somaliland, whose mission is to improve maternal and infant healthcare and fight the practice of female genital mutilation. The hospital trains healthcare professionals and midwives who are then dispatched across the country.

ALDE nominated the late Russian political oppositionist [Boris Nemtsov](#). Educated as a physicist, he was provincial governor in the early 1990s and then deputy-prime minister of Russia as of 1997. While holding these posts, he voiced strong [support](#) for 'shock therapy' economics and the rapid privatisation of the Russian economy, and opposed the war in Chechnya. In the 2000s, he became an outspoken critic of Putin's regime, attended numerous protest marches in Moscow and was repeatedly arrested for periods of several days. He co-founded Solidarnost, a movement against corruption and lawlessness. He opposed Russia's annexation of Crimea. He was shot in February 2015, while preparing a [report](#) on Russia's involvement in the war in Ukraine.

Another nominee of the ECR is Ukrainian army helicopter pilot Nadiya Savchenko, who is also a member of the Ukrainian Parliament and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. In 2004–2005, Savchenko [served](#) six months with the Ukrainian contingent in Iraq. Later, she [was](#) one of the first Ukrainian women to train as an air force pilot. In early 2014, she joined the Aidar Battalion, a volunteer group fighting pro-Russian separatists in the country's east. According to her claims, she was captured the same year by pro-Russian rebels in eastern Ukraine and is currently detained in Russia, where she stands [trial](#) for allegedly murdering two Russian journalists in an attack on a rebel checkpoint in eastern Ukraine.

GUE/NGL nominated three whistle-blowers: [Edward Snowden](#), [Antoine Deltour](#) and [Stéphanie Gibaud](#). Snowden, a CIA computer analyst, leaked sensitive information in 2013 about the United States' extensive private communication surveillance programme. Deltour, a former PriceWaterhouseCoopers junior auditor, leaked sensitive [information](#) ('LuxLeaks') regarding tax rulings by the Government of Luxembourg granting certain multinationals a favourable tax regime. He now faces [charges](#) in Luxembourg which could lead to his imprisonment and a fine. Gibaud, a former marketing officer for UBS France, [disclosed](#) organised practices of tax evasion and tax fraud in the bank.

'Intellectual freedom is essential to human society – freedom to obtain and distribute information, freedom for open-minded and unfearing debate, and freedom from pressure by officialdom and prejudices.' ([Sakharov](#))