

Sakharov Prize: Voices of humanity

The European Parliament is a staunch supporter of human rights defenders from all over the world. Each year, the Parliament grants the Sakharov Prize to such individuals in recognition of their outstanding achievements in defending human rights. The prize draws attention to particularly worthy causes and has an important resonance with the public.

European Union recognition of human rights defenders

The EU is committed to protecting human rights through its external policy, in line with the [Treaty on European Union](#). Supporting [human rights defenders](#) is an important part of this policy, as the EU recognises that they play a key role in standing up for fundamental rights and protecting people whose human rights have been violated. The EU helps them by making political statements and démarches, providing emergency aid and encouraging third countries to create a friendly environment for them.

The European Parliament is strongly committed to the [cause](#) of human rights in the world. During its monthly plenary sessions, the EP highlights, in its resolutions, the gravest human rights violations in the world. In its most recent [yearly reports](#) on human rights and democracy in the world, the EP has urged the EU to step up its support for human rights defenders, in order to address rising threats. The EP applies parliamentary diplomacy to defend human rights during visits of its Members to third countries, or through its delegations. Among these actions, the Sakharov Prize, being the EU's best-known award for human rights, occupies a unique and prominent place. Awarded each year, it attracts considerable media attention and focuses public attention on pressing human rights causes. It honours individuals and organisations who go to great lengths, sometimes taking enormous risks, to defend human rights.

The Sakharov Prize: significance and award procedure

What is the Sakharov Prize awarded for?

The [prize](#) is awarded for a specific achievement in one of the following fields: defence of human rights and fundamental freedoms, particularly the right to freedom of expression; safeguarding the rights of minorities; respect for international law; development of democracy; and implementation of the rule of law.

How was the prize given its name?

The prize was created through a Parliament resolution of 13 December 1985. It bears the name of prominent Soviet-era dissident, Andrei Sakharov, joint inventor of the Soviet hydrogen bomb, 1975 Nobel Peace Prize winner and campaigner for human rights and nuclear disarmament in the Soviet Union. His courageous defence of human rights was met with repression by the Soviet regime.

Selection procedure

The selection procedure is aimed at making a representative choice that draws wide support from the political groups in Parliament. Nominations can be made by any of the political groups or by at least 40 Members. They are formally submitted during a joint meeting of the Foreign Affairs (AFET) and Development (DEVE) Committees, which vote on a shortlist of three finalists. Subsequently, the Conference of Presidents, composed of the Parliament's president and the leaders of the political groups, choose the laureate, usually seeking a consensus choice. The prize, which comes with a financial grant of €50 000, is awarded annually at a ceremony held during the December plenary session in Strasbourg. All three finalists are invited to the ceremony and attend various meetings organised for them in the Parliament. In the history of the prize, several laureates have missed the ceremony because they were imprisoned or were prevented from travelling; most recently, this happened to [Raif Badawi](#) in 2015.

This note has been prepared for the [European Youth Event](#), taking place in Strasbourg in June 2018.

Empowering laureates and their causes

What does the prize mean for its laureates?

The prize brings significant [recognition](#) to its laureates and to their cause, and encourages them to continue their work. In some cases, it has arguably led to a loosening of repression against its holders – a fact that bears witness to its prestige and importance. It also provides a boost to certain human rights causes by bringing urgent issues, such as sexual violence against women in conflict, to the world's attention. The fight against this scourge was rewarded in [2014](#) and in [2016](#).

While the prize can be awarded to human rights defenders both in and outside the EU, so far only one laureate – [¡Basta Ya!](#), a Spanish organisation opposing terrorism, particularly acts committed by ETA – has been an EU-based organisation.

Sakharov Prize [laureates](#) have as a general rule continued their fight for human rights. Some of them, such as Nelson Mandela, Aung San Suu Kyi, Kofi Annan and the UN staff, and Malala Yousafzai, have also received the Nobel Peace Prize. Some have acceded later to the highest positions of power, with examples being Nelson Mandela (first president of multiracial South Africa), Alexander Dubček (chair of the Czechoslovak federal assembly after the fall of communism), Aung San Suu Kyi (now de facto leader of Burma/Myanmar) and Xanana Gusmão (first president of liberated East Timor). In the case of Aung San Suu Kyi, who has been much [criticised](#) for her lack of commitment to the human rights of Rohingya refugees, the Parliament has hinted at the possibility of [revoking](#) the prize. Unfortunately, the Sakharov Prize has not put an end to repression against other laureates, such as liberal Saudi blogger Raif Badawi. While international recognition has helped him escape cruel punishment, the blogger remains imprisoned in Saudi Arabia to this day. [Calls](#) by the European Parliament for his release have remained unanswered. Since the 2011 laureate, [Razan Zaitouneh](#), was kidnapped in 2013 by an unknown group in Syria, there has been no news from her. [Calls](#) by the EP for her release have been to no avail. Given the risks former laureates face, the Parliament maintains a privileged relationship with them through the [Sakharov Prize network](#), and continues to monitor their situation and to intervene on their behalf. Most recently, it has done so with regard to 1995 Turkish laureate [Leyla Zena](#), who was stripped of her parliamentary mandate back home; to Sudanese 2007 laureate [Salih Osman](#), who was arrested in February 2018 and released two months later; and to [Oyub Titiev](#), chair of the Human Rights Centre Memorial (the centre won the Sakharov Prize in 2009), who was arrested by the Russian authorities in early 2018. Protecting defenders is sometimes a challenging task for the EU and the EP, as, in particular, on certain occasions at Member State level, [other interests](#) trump human rights concerns.

The 2017 Sakharov prize

The [2017 Sakharov Prize](#) was awarded to the democratic opposition in Venezuela, in particular to the national assembly (headed by [Julio Borges](#)) and the [political prisoners](#). The opposition is currently grouped in the [Democratic Unity Roundtable](#) (*Mesa de la Unidad Democrática – MUD*), a [coalition](#) of parties from across the whole political spectrum. After it had lost by a [narrow margin](#) in the 2010 legislative and 2013 presidential elections, it got an [overwhelming majority](#) in the December 2015 parliamentary elections. The resulting parliament (National Assembly) however had its [powers](#) severely curtailed in 2017, which led to massive [street protests](#) headed by the opposition. The protests were heavily [repressed](#) by the government, as had often happened in the past in similar situations. As a result, many government opponents were arrested, including prominent politicians like Leopoldo López, Antonio Ledezma – who recently escaped from house arrest – and Daniel Ceballos. According to the [Foro Penal Venezolano](#), as of [31 October 2017](#), there were 444 people under arrest, 380 political prisoners, and 198 civilians in jail after having been judged by [military courts](#). Democracy and political rights are in a ['dire state'](#) according to the Organization of American States. The Sakharov Prize was awarded to the opposition in [recognition](#) of its courageous struggle and as a sign of solidarity with the Venezuelan people.

Protecting defenders: an even more urgent mission for the EU in the current climate

Human rights have come under increased pressure in today's world and those who stand up to defend them face [growing risks](#) from repressive governments, private organised criminal groups, or extremists of all sorts. Authoritarian regimes, in disregard of their human rights obligations, have intensified their [repressive](#) acts, particularly against civil society. The EU remains committed to protecting human rights defenders with all of the means at its disposal. Unlike other EU actions favouring human rights, where the Union uses its economic and political leverage (such as political dialogue, development aid, sanctions, or human rights conditionality in trade relations), the value of the Sakharov Prize resides mainly in its symbolic nature. However, the inspiring power of those who stand up for human rights and freedoms, as Andrei Sakharov once did, should not be underestimated.

