

EU support for human rights defenders around the world

SUMMARY

Support for human rights defenders (HRDs) is a long established component of the EU's external human rights policy and one of its major priorities. With the adoption of Guidelines on HRDs in 2004, the EU established a set of concrete measures for ensuring the protection of HRDs at risk, including the provision of emergency aid. The guidelines encourage EU diplomats to take a more proactive approach by establishing contact with HRDs and intervening on their behalf when they are at risk. Furthermore, the European Commission manages a financial instrument in support of HRDs working in the world's most dangerous situations. Today, EU support is all the more important, as the environment in which HRDs operate is increasingly restrictive and HRDs have been facing a growing number of threats.

The European Parliament has been a long-time advocate of a comprehensive EU policy on HRDs and has actively contributed to its shaping. It has drawn attention to the difficulties confronting HRDs in many countries through its urgency resolutions on human rights breaches in the world, some of which have focused on individual HRDs and the particular threats they face. It has also organised hearings with HRDs, issued statements about cases of HRDs at risk, and highlighted the plight of HRDs during visits by its delegations to the countries concerned. The Parliament's Sakharov Prize is the EU's most visible action in favour of HRDs. It has a significant impact on laureates, providing them with recognition and, in many cases, indirect protection.

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In this briefing:

- Establishment of an EU policy on HRDs
- Main aspects of the EU policy on HRDs
 - EU proposed actions in favour of HRDs
 - Examples of recent EU actions
 - Financial support
- What is the European Parliament doing?
- The Sakharov Prize
- Main references

Glossary

Human rights defenders (HRDs): 'Human rights defenders are those individuals, groups and organs of society that promote and protect universally recognised human rights and fundamental freedoms. Human rights defenders seek to promote and protect civil and political rights as well as to promote, protect and bring about economic, social and cultural rights. Human rights defenders also promote and protect the rights of members of groups such as indigenous communities. The definition does not include those individuals or groups who commit or propagate violence'. ([EU Guidelines on HRDs](#)).

Establishment of an EU policy on human rights defenders

The EU is committed to the protection of human rights in its external policy, in line with Article 21 of the [Treaty on European Union](#), which states that EU action on the international stage should be guided by the principles of universality and indivisibility of human rights and fundamental freedoms, and that the Union should act to consolidate and support human rights in international relations. Protecting HRDs in the world contributes to fulfilling this objective, as acknowledged by the EU Guidelines on human rights defenders, adopted by the Council of the EU in 2004 and [updated](#) in 2008. The guidelines recognise that HRDs play a key role in defending fundamental rights and in protecting victims, by documenting human rights violations, providing victims of such violations with legal, psychological, medical or other support, combating the impunity of those responsible, and raising awareness of human rights and their defenders at national, regional and international levels. Although HRDs have enjoyed growing recognition over the years, they have also increasingly become the target of attacks and rights violations, and therefore need protection.

The guidelines define HRDs by reference to the [UN Declaration](#) on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognised Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, adopted by the UN General Assembly in December 1998 with active EU support. Article 1 of the declaration sets out the right of each person, 'individually and in association with others, to promote and to strive for the protection and realization of human rights and fundamental freedoms at the national and international levels'. HRDs can range from inter-governmental organisations based in the world's largest cities, to individuals working within their local communities. They are identified above all by what they do in the interest of human rights. According to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), there are certain [minimum standards](#) that one must meet to be considered an HRD:

- HRDs must accept the universality of human rights as defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.
- It is not essential for an HRD to be correct in his or her arguments in order to be a genuine defender, as long as he or she defends a human right.
- HRDs have to be peaceful in their actions.

HRDs can operate in various fields, such as freedom of expression, women's rights, LGBTI rights, labour rights, land rights and fighting slavery.

The EU has reaffirmed its commitment to protecting HRDs through its key human rights documents adopted in the past few years. The 2012 [EU Strategic framework and action plan on human rights and democracy](#) pledged to extend political and financial support

for HRDs, and to step up EU efforts against all forms of reprisal against them. Responding to recommendations from civil society organisations, the 2014 [Council conclusions](#) on the 10th anniversary of the EU Guidelines on HRDs emphasised the important role of women HRDs and HRDs from vulnerable and marginalised groups. They also urged that all states create a safe and enabling environment for all HRDs. The revised [EU Action plan on human rights and democracy 2015-2019](#), adopted in July 2015, recommended stepping up support for HRDs, especially those working on women's rights (point 8), LGBTI rights and the rights and inclusion of persons from marginalised groups, while also stressing the importance of outreach in rural areas (point 9). The action plan further called for increased support to HRDs working on labour rights, land rights and indigenous issues (point 17c).

EU policy on human rights defenders

The EU's proposed actions in favour of HRDs

The EU is the world's biggest supporter of HRDs, a role it accomplishes by providing them with a wide range of assistance measures and financial aid. The European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) – the largest pro-HRDs programme worldwide – can provide aid directly to HRDs without informing the government of the country in question or demanding its prior consent.

The EU Guidelines on HRDs provide practical steps for EU action in bilateral relations at all levels and in multilateral fora, as well as measures for the protection of HRDs at risk. EU missions (EU delegations and Member States' embassies) are the primary interface between the EU and HRDs and play an important role in practice. That said, action in favour of HRDs should also be taken at EU level. When acting to protect HRDs facing particular threats, EU missions should use caution, since 'in certain cases EU action could lead to threats and attacks against HRDs'. In such situations, the HRDs must be consulted on the actions to be taken.

More specifically, the guidelines advise that EU actions should include the following:

- EU missions should be encouraged to adopt a pro-active approach towards HRDs. This includes establishing contacts with the HRDs, receiving them in the mission premises, visiting them on the ground, and increasing their public recognition through the media or through invitations and visits.
- EU missions should send observers to trials of HRDs and visit HRDs in custody.
- The EU should issue demarches and/or public statements (this can be done, for example, by the EU delegation based in the relevant country, the EU High Representative, the EU Special Representative for Human Rights or the EEAS spokesperson); cases of HRDs should be raised during political or human rights dialogues with the countries concerned or during high-level visits. When visiting a country, high-ranking EU officials should include meetings with human rights defenders in their programmes.
- EU delegations are expected to report periodically on the situation of HRDs, including on the relevant institutional and legislative framework. They should organise an annual meeting between HRDs and EU diplomats in order to coordinate and share HRD-related information. Heads of delegations should make recommendations to the Council of the EU's Working Party on Human Rights ([COHOM](#)) for possible EU action, especially concerning HRDs at immediate risk.

- The EU should support the [Special Procedures](#) of the UN Human Rights Council, including the [Special Rapporteur](#) on the situation of human rights defenders. It should also promote the strengthening of existing regional mechanisms for the protection of HRDs. EU missions should promote the use of UN thematic mechanisms by local human rights defenders.
- As an overarching objective, the EU should encourage third countries to create an environment in which HRDs can operate freely.
- In cases of emergency, visas should be issued and temporary shelter for HRDs provided in EU Member States or in their region.

Increasing hardships facing HRDs

It has become increasingly difficult for HRDs to operate in various parts of the world, which makes EU support for them all the more important. HRDs face numerous restrictions resulting from intensified crack-downs on civil society. Furthermore, many authoritarian regimes have raised substantial barriers before foreign assistance to human rights defenders and civil society organisations in more general terms. According to the [EU Annual report](#) on human rights and democracy in the world in 2016, 'Restrictions on civil society and repression of human rights defenders have taken multiple forms, ranging from administrative and judicial harassment to smear campaigns, travel bans, criminalisation, stigmatisation, arbitrary arrest and detention, extrajudicial executions, and blocking of access to funding, especially from external sources. Both state and non-state actors, including armed and fundamentalist groups, pose offline and online threats to freedoms for civil society'.

The [Monitoring platform](#), managed by the Human Rights Defenders Mechanism (a mechanism financed by the EU and managed by civil society organisations, which helps human rights defenders in difficult situations - as explained in a further section), tracks cases of alerts and attacks against HRDs and documents violations committed against them in the course of their work. Since the beginning of 2016 to date, the platform has registered more than 1 500 violations against HRDs, among them judicial abuses, intimidation and physical violence, and has reported 384 killings of HRDs. Almost 70% of the targeted defenders were active in the field of civil political rights. The Americas emerge as the region with the highest number of violations, accounting for around a third of total violations worldwide.

EU action in practice

This new reality makes EU action all the more urgent. It also requires that the EU adapt its methods to the increasingly difficult environment in which civil society operates. In practice, the EU has been addressing the HRDs' situation through a wide and complex array of measures in line with the guidelines described above. The EU annual reports on human rights and democracy contain numerous examples of actions undertaken on behalf of HRDs¹.

Statements and démarches: at central and at delegations level, the EU has issued numerous statements and delivered various demarches, both via formal and informal channels, on behalf of HRDs. It has asked for the release of imprisoned HRDs, has condemned reprisals and attacks against them, including killings, and has urged third countries to create or uphold an enabling environment.

Providing visibility and reaching out to HDRs. EU diplomats have reached out to HRDs in many ways, for example by making field visits to meet with those at risk. EU delegations

also make efforts to draw public attention to the important activity of HRDs. For example, the EU delegation in Uganda, together with Norway and the EU Member States, hands out a regular award to HRDs for their outstanding achievements in the country. In 2017, the award was given to Pamela Judith Angwech, founder and executive director of the Gulu Women's Economic Development and Globalization (GWED-G), the region's largest grassroots human rights organisation focused on women and youth.

Protecting HRDs who have been imprisoned or are facing charges. EU delegations have attended trials of opposition members, civil society and human rights activists, have tracked their legal cases and have sometimes visited them in prison or accompanied them when they have been summoned by the police (e.g. in 2016 in Chad, DRC, Sudan, Mozambique, Tanzania and Saudi Arabia). The EU has also provided legal assistance to HRDs on various occasions (e.g. in Burkina Faso).

Working for an appropriate environment. The EU has systematically reacted to legal restrictions in place and to a climate of intimidation and fear, expressing its concern about the misuse of law to prosecute human rights defenders and journalists in order to silence freedom of expression. Furthermore, it has worked together with the authorities and civil society to improve the regulatory and financial framework for civil society in a number of countries (e.g. in [Brazil](#)). The recently adopted [EU country roadmaps](#) for engagement with civil society include the promotion of an enabling environment for civil society organisations as one of their priorities.

Meeting regularly with HRDs. Many EU delegations have held, at least once a year, while some even several times, meetings with HRDs all over the world, to encourage swifter coordination amongst them, provide useful information to strengthen their capacity and listen to their concerns. Member States' embassies have also been involved in such meetings. In some cases, the authorities have placed obstacles before the EU delegations when organising such meetings.

Setting up human rights focal points and liaison officers in EU delegations. The completion of 'a network of focal points on human rights and democracy in EU Delegations', as provided for in the EU Strategic framework and action plan on human rights, contributes to developing the EU's capacity to engage with HRDs. Most EU delegations have nominated one or two such focal points and have [published](#) their contact details online. The establishment of dedicated liaison officers in the field to act as a first point of contact for local HRDs, as set out in the guidelines, has also advanced, with a person nominated in most EU delegations. Sometimes these tasks are shared with Member States' embassies.

HRDs in human rights dialogues and other bilateral contacts with third countries. Human rights defenders feature among the priorities to be addressed in the framework of human rights dialogues with third countries, as envisaged in the EU [Guidelines](#) on such dialogues. The EU holds formal human rights dialogues and consultations with many partner countries and regional groupings. In addition, the 79 African, Caribbean and Pacific countries that are party to the Cotonou Agreement conduct a political dialogue with the EU, including on human rights issues. A regular but not uniform practice is to hand over 'an individual cases list' of human rights violations committed against HRDs or other individuals in the course of these dialogues. To protect HRDs, the EU has also contacted national human rights institutions; for instance, this has been done in India on a case by case basis.

The EU Special Representative ([EUSR](#)) for human rights, Stavros Lambrinidis, plays a central role in addressing HRD concerns in dialogues with third countries. The EUSR for human rights has focused on addressing new restrictive laws that are increasingly affecting the work of HRDs and on working with third countries' authorities for the release of imprisoned HRDs.

Confidentiality of assistance. EU help to HRDs, especially in the form of financial and other emergency support, often remains confidential, to protect its beneficiaries. In countries where the context is particularly difficult and human rights defenders have to conduct discreet activities, visible support is counterproductive. In such cases, the EU may finance projects for enhancing HRD protection, implemented by international NGOs in partnership with local civil society organisations.

A recent [study](#) drafted for the Parliament makes an overall assessment of EU efforts to protect and promote civil society organisations and human rights defenders in the increasingly harsh conditions they face in many parts of the world. The study has found that the 'most effective part of these EU responses has been the protection offered to human rights defenders', which speaks of the fact that the EU has stepped up its efforts to the capacity building of civil society and made its aid modalities more flexible. However, the EU has not been so effective in dealing with the 'deeper, structural aspects' of the problem involving the 'shrinking space for civil society'. More efforts would be needed to implement concrete measures and benchmarks to respond to the narrowing civic space. Consideration should also be given to the fact that EU high-level diplomacy is sometimes too cautious in confronting regimes engaged in brutal civil society crackdowns. What the EU needs is a clearer strategic approach to the shrinking space.

An earlier [2013 study](#), commissioned by the Parliament on the EU's policy on HRDs, acknowledged the good practices of ensuring their security, monitoring trials, providing support in emergency situations and challenging laws that criminalise HRDs. It also indicated several areas where improvement was needed, with a particular focus on raising awareness of the EU Guidelines on HRDs both among diplomatic staff and HRDs themselves. While many of the polled HRDs suggested the need for a more proactive approach by EU staff, others noted that in some cases direct contact with EU country representatives was not the best approach because of the possibility of reprisals by state or non-state actors, or of language and cultural barriers. EU diplomats should observe the rule of only intervening with the agreement of HRDs or their family. Public declarations made in connection with acts issued to condemn HRDs should be less reactive (that is, occurring after they have been condemned), and more pre-emptive.

Financial support

The 2014-2020 European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights ([EIDHR](#)) covers several priority actions on human rights and democracy, among them support for HRDs. According to recital 18 of the [regulation](#) establishing the instrument, 'The Union should pay particular attention to countries and urgency situations where human rights and fundamental freedoms are most at risk and where disrespect for those rights and freedoms is particularly pronounced and systematic'. In line with this principle, the EIDHR's Objective 1, entitled 'Support to human rights and human rights defenders in situations where they are most at risk', aims to respond to HRDs' urgent needs and to provide medium and long-term support to HRDs and civil society, enabling them to carry out their work. Accordingly, 20–25 % of the total financial envelope under the EIDHR's [multiannual indicative programme](#) for the 2014-2017 period has been allocated to meeting the above objective. Two main types of direct financial support to HRDs have been provided:

1. Direct grants for HRDs operating in dangerous situations

An emergency fund, established in 2010 and managed under the EIDHR, provides direct [small grants](#) of up to €10 000 per grant to HRDs (individuals or organisations) in need of urgent support. The grant is used for covering fees for legal representation or medical expenses, purchasing security material for offices or homes, paying for the evacuation of an HRD to another country, supporting the operations of a human rights organisation in a difficult financial situation, and other similar events. Such support usually remains confidential. Between 2010 and early 2017, over 330 grants amounting to over €3 million were disbursed to more than 500 HRDs and organisations in over 50 countries.

Provided under the 2014-2020 EIDHR, this second type of funding is in the form of grants of up to €1 million to civil society for the promotion of human rights and fundamental freedoms in some of the world's most difficult and dangerous situations, or where they are most vulnerable and threatened. This funding is granted under the EIDHR Human Rights Crises Facility, endowed with an annual amount of €3.5 million.

2. Funding for projects selected through calls for proposals

Apart from these direct grants, the Commission also selects projects through global and local calls for proposals designed to reinforce the capacities of HRDs both as individuals and organisations. In 2016, out of the €27.94 million contracted through the global call for proposals under the EIDHR, €5.11 million was dedicated to local HRD organisations working at grassroots level.

Comprehensive HRD mechanism

To better address the urgent need for protection of HRDs facing imminent risks but also to provide them with longer-term assistance, including shelter, a comprehensive HRD mechanism was established in October 2015, following a [call for proposals](#). It complements the support already provided directly under the EIDHR and is managed by a consortium of 12 international NGOs.² It is funded with €15 million over three years and covers the entire world, including remote areas. Its broad range of support measures include: **urgent support** (physical/digital protection, legal support, medical support, trial and prison monitoring, urgent advocacy, urgent relocation, support for families, urgent monitoring and reporting, a permanent, 24/7 helpline for human rights defenders); **medium-term support** (monitoring of the situation of HRDs, early warning, reinforcement of capacities, training on risk prevention and security, international, regional and national advocacy on both individual cases and the legislative framework, temporary relocation and legal support for lengthy judicial procedures); and **long-term support** (support for national networks, advocacy, lobbying and the development of strategies to counter restrictions and sanctions imposed on human rights defenders by states, including defamation, laws on foreign funding and criminalisation of HRDs).

A [platform](#) for relocation of HRDs at risk, featuring [numerous organisations](#) (cities, universities, NGOs, professional organisations/associations ready to help HRDs to relocate) has been launched on the Commission's initiative and is now managed by the Human Rights Defenders Mechanism. All stakeholders involved in relocation activities, including cities and universities, are eligible for funding.

What is the European Parliament doing?

The European Parliament is a strong supporter of the HRDs cause. It has constantly urged the EU to step up its efforts on behalf of HRDs and has systematically addressed the situation of HRDs in the world through the various tools at its disposal. The Parliament has followed the EU's policy on HRDs closely and has on occasion made

recommendations for improving it, including in its annual human rights reports. In its 2010 [resolution on EU HRD policy](#), the EP made numerous proposals for making the policy more effective. These included strengthening the implementation of the guidelines by EU delegations; increasing public recognition and visibility of HRDs as a way to protect them; enhancing the transparency of EU actions (e.g. making the list of names of HRDs whose cases are being addressed available to the EU public, except when this would put the HRDs at risk); and facilitating the protection of HRDs at risks – through stronger involvement and coordination of Member States, including through the issuance of emergency visas, and by providing temporary protection and shelter for such HRDs.

Parliament has also developed its own tools for addressing cases of HRDs in the world. The most important one is in the form of 'urgency' [resolutions](#) on human rights breaches in the world. Over the years, such resolutions have constantly drawn attention to cases where HRDs are at risk. Of the over 100 urgency resolutions adopted since the start of the current parliamentary term until the November 2017 first plenary, the vast majority refer to human rights defenders. They focus either specifically on individual human rights defenders facing threats and repression in certain countries or refer more generally to the difficult situation of human rights defenders as part of a wider picture of human rights violations in the countries concerned.

2017 resolutions

In urgency resolutions adopted since the start of 2017, the EP has highlighted the particularly difficult situation of HRDs in countries such as the Maldives, Russia and occupied Crimea, Cambodia, Laos, Burundi, China, Pakistan, Azerbaijan, Ethiopia, Zimbabwe, Guatemala and Nicaragua. Cases of persecuted HRDs brought to the public's attention have covered people working in a wide range of areas including indigenous rights and land rights, freedom of expression and freedom of the press, political and civil rights, and the rights of ethnic minorities. The Parliament has also held debates in plenary on problematic human rights situations, touching on the issue of those who stand up for human rights and fundamental freedoms (such as an example is the debate on [Venezuela](#) in September 2017). The Parliament also addresses the issue of HRDs in its resolutions on more general topics. For example, in its [resolution of 13 September 2017](#) on EU political relations with Latin America, Parliament expressed its regrets about attacks on HRDs and urged governments pass laws and take measures capable of protecting them.

In its urgency resolutions, the Parliament has formulated various demands with a view to protecting HRDs at risk and to improving the overall environment in which they operate. Most importantly, the Parliament has called upon the governments of the countries concerned, amongst others, to: release jailed HRDs immediately; ensure that conditions permit HRDs to carry out their work; and to guarantee in particular HRDs' right to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly, and their right to a fair trial. The Parliament has urged the EU to step up the political dialogue on human rights with certain countries where there are systematic violations of the human rights of HRDs and of human rights in general; to revise its policy towards such countries; and, if needed, to reconsider the provision of financial aid. It calls upon the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the EU delegations to closely monitor trials of HRDs, undertake prison visits and issue public statements.

In other resolutions, the Parliament has reacted to the phenomenon of the 'shrinking space for civil society'. It highlighted this problem in its [2016 resolution](#) on the EU Annual report on human rights and democracy, focusing specifically on journalists and

HRDs. It called for a public annual Foreign Affairs Council addressing the shrinking space for civil society and the jailing of HRDs and urged the High Representative and the Member States' foreign ministers to address HRD cases with relevant counterparts on all occasions, including those raised in the Parliament's resolutions.

In its March 2017 [resolution](#) on EU priorities for the UN Human Rights Council session in 2017, the Parliament expressed its concern about the ever-increasing attempts to shrink the space of civil society and human rights defenders and underscored the importance of the role of human rights NGOs and defenders in the promotion and protection of human rights. In a [resolution](#) from October 2017, the Parliament expressed its deep concern that 'the closing down of civil society space in developing countries is being carried out in increasingly complex and sophisticated ways, which are harder to tackle' and is being implemented through legislation, taxation, funding limitations, increased bureaucracy, reporting and banking requirements, the criminalisation and stigmatisation of CSO representatives, defamation, all forms of harassment, online repression and internet access limitations, censorship, arbitrary detention, gender-based violence, torture and assassination, in particular in conflict-stricken states. The Parliament called on the EU to put in place monitoring tools for the implementation of the EU Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders and to support the creation of a safe and enabling environment for women's rights defenders. It called on the Commission, the EEAS and the Member States to promote the effective joint implementation of the guidelines in all third countries where civil society is at risk, by adopting local strategies.

Other actions of the Parliament on behalf of HRDs include public hearings of HRDs in the Human Rights Subcommittee (DROI) and press statements (by the Parliament president, the DROI chair or members of parliamentary delegations after a country visit) on HRDs at risk. The DROI subcommittee monitors the follow-up given by the EEAS to urgency resolutions and organises updates on the human rights situation in various countries, including addressing cases of HRDs. The DROI delegations raise cases of HRDs during their visits to third countries, and so should all parliamentary standing delegations whenever relevant. According to the [Guidelines](#) for European Parliament inter-parliamentary delegations on promoting human rights and democracy in their visits to non-EU countries, Parliament delegations should raise cases of HRDs in meetings with the authorities of third countries, asking for authorisation for prison visits where possible.

The Sakharov Prize

The Parliament's best known action in the area of human rights defenders is the Sakharov Prize for freedom of thought. The [prize](#) was created in December 1985, and bears the name of one of the best known Soviet dissidents, Andrei Sakharov – the joint inventor of the Soviet hydrogen bomb, a physics Nobel Prize winner in 1975 and a campaigner for human rights and nuclear disarmament in the former Soviet Union. The Parliament closely followed his activities from the 1970s onward. In a 1980 resolution it condemned his arrest by the Soviet authorities the previous year and adopted further resolutions in his support in 1983 and 1984.

Sakharov's name was chosen for the prize because he was seen as a symbol of freedom of thought and expression. Originally, the prize was intended to be granted for the submission of a work or study in the field of human rights, but later its scope was extended to also include any notable activities or achievements on the subject. According to the new [statute](#) adopted in May 2003, the prize gets awarded for a

particular 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 freedom of expression; safeguarding the rights of minorities; respect for international law; and the development of democracy and implementation of the rule of law.

The first prize was awarded in 1988 to Nelson Mandela and, posthumously, to Soviet dissident Anatoli Marchenko. Other famous winners of the prize include then leading Burmese dissident, Aung San Suu Kyi, Kofi Annan and the UN staff, Reporters without Borders, Chinese democracy activist, Hu Jia, and Mala Yousafazi, an advocate for the rights of women and girls in Pakistan. Three Sakharov Prize winners were subsequently awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

The 2017 Sakharov Prize laureate

This year, the prize was awarded to the [democratic opposition](#) in Venezuela: the National Assembly ([Julio Borges](#)) and all [political prisoners](#) as listed by [Foro Penal Venezolano](#), including [Leopoldo López](#), [Antonio Ledezma](#), [Daniel Ceballos](#), [Yon Goicoechea](#), [Lorent Saleh](#), [Alfredo Ramos](#) and [Andrea González](#). The democratic opposition to the 'chavista' government is currently grouped in the [Democratic Unity Roundtable](#) ('Mesa de la Unidad Democrática', MUD), a [coalition](#) of parties from the whole political spectrum, from the centre-left to the right. The [National Assembly](#), elected in December 2015 and led by the MUD – with 56.25 % of the votes and 109 elected MPs – has seen its [work](#) systematically hampered by the government-controlled Supreme Court of Justice (TSJ) and National Electoral Council (CNE), and more recently by the new National Constituent Assembly ([ANC](#)), which has taken over its legislative powers. The repression of opposition-led protests in the last few years has resulted in the death or imprisonment of numerous [citizens](#). According to Foro Penal Venezolano's [latest report](#), as of 31 October 2017 there were 380 political prisoners in the country and 198 civilians had been imprisoned after a trial by a military court.

Impact of the prize on laureates

The Sakharov Prize has acquired a strong reputation. The annual award receives much attention in the international press and has great impact on the laureates themselves.³ It represents major recognition, acknowledged as such by the laureates, of their efforts on behalf of human rights. The prize provides significant **moral and psychological support**, boosting the confidence of laureates, who often work in very difficult conditions, and encouraging them to continue their work. Through the international attention it has attracted, the prize has helped to **ensure the physical security** of laureates. For instance, it may have contributed to the avoidance of imprisonment (in the case of Aliaksandr Milinkevich from Belarus), to acquittal (in the case of Oleg Orlov from Russia), and to the release from prison (of Nasrin Sotoudeh from Iran). In other cases, however, governments have maintained or even intensified pressure on laureates.

In a number of countries whose governments are not responsive to criticism from outside, open defamation campaigns have been launched against laureates, portraying them as 'traitors' because they are working on behalf of the enemy (the West). This has happened in Algeria, Belarus, Cuba, and Egypt, to give just a few examples.

As acknowledged by all laureates, the prize has helped them attain **visibility and recognition** in their country and/or abroad. At domestic level, the degree of recognition has varied: some political regimes have restricted information on the prize in the media; in other cases, lack of awareness about the international significance of the prize has limited recognition. The prize has increased laureates' **access to the international community**, linking them with universities, international organisations and high-level

politicians, and giving them the possibility to be included in consultations on issues of interest for their country. Through its financial award, the prize has **empowered** many laureates to **continue and expand their activities** defending human rights.

The [Sakharov Prize Network](#) – an initiative aimed at promoting and supporting prize laureates and enhancing their contacts with each other and with the Members of the European Parliament and civil society – was launched in 2008. The network also aims to focus attention on human rights violations in laureates' countries.

In its 2010 Resolution on HRDs, the EP underlined the need to actively support and develop proposals on how the Sakharov Prize Network could be used as part of a sustained programme of support for human rights defenders. It also expressed its concern over the infringements of the human rights of certain Sakharov Prize winners.

Main references

[Assessing the implementation of the European Union Guidelines on human rights defenders - The cases of Kyrgyzstan, Thailand and Tunisia](#), Policy Department for External Relations, European Parliament, June 2013.

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[Council Conclusions on the Action plan on human rights and democracy 2015-2019](#), July 2015.

[Annual report on human rights and democracy in the world in 2016](#), EU, October 2017.

[Report on enhancing the contribution of EU institutions and Member States, NGOs, IFIs and human rights defenders, to more effective engagement with, and monitoring of, the activities of non-state actors](#), Frame, March 2015.

[Shrinking space for civil society](#), Policy Department for External Relations, European Parliament, April 2017.

Endnotes

- ¹ Most examples in this section are from recent EU annual reports on human rights and democracy in the world.
- ² The partners in this consortium are 12 independent international NGOs that have practical experience of working in support of human rights defenders at risk all over the world: Front Line Defenders, Reporters Without Borders (RSF), World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT), International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), Economic, Social and Cultural Rights Network (ESCR-Net), International Gay and Lesbian Association (ILGA), Urgent Action Fund for Women Human Rights Defenders (UAF), Protection International, Peace Brigades International (PBI), Euro-Mediterranean Foundation of Support to Human Rights Defenders (EMHRF), Forum Asia, and East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project (EHAHRDP).
- ³ The impact of the prize on laureates was analysed in a 2013 [study](#) commissioned by the Parliament. The statements in this section are based on the main findings of this study.

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