Sakharov Prize: 30 years of honouring human rights defenders

The Sakharov Prize has been honouring human rights defenders for the last 30 years. These are the stories of four activists who have dedicated their lives to freedom.

On the 30th anniversary of the Sakharov Prize, the European Parliament, in collaboration with Magnum photos, has launched a new documentary project, a photo exhibition presenting the life and work of four different activists and Sakharov Fellows who incarnate, through their actions, the very essence of freedom of thought and expression.

Asma Kaouech, a young Tunisian activist fights to prevent young people from becoming radicalised. The association she created, Fanni Raghman Anni, offers to young Tunisians the opportunity to express themselves through street theatre (see photo below), workshops, and cultural activities. Photographed by Newsha Tavakolian.

The Cambodian Samrith Vaing travels to remote villages, documenting the life of indigenous minorities contending with forced eviction and talking to them about their rights. Their way of life is threatened by aggressive and unregulated agribusiness that puts profit ahead of the local populations. Photographed by Jérôme Sessini.

Jadranka Miličević is a Bosnian former refugee from the war in Bosnia in the 1990s and a full-time women’s rights activist. She travels from village to village and meets women in despair, helps them to take control of their lives, become independent and aware of their rights. Through her foundation and the workshops she organises, she promotes gender equality and the positive development of society through education and culture. Photographed by Bieke Depoorter.

Miličević visits women she empowers through her foundation and the workshops she runs regularly. Elda Šišić, the daughter of Lejla Omerović, lives in an isolated village called Vares. She works with her family to produce soap, skin products, and other small goods. Lejla helped start a local NGO called Zvejsda Varesj (Star), which aims to support local women in need, especially by producing products locally. The Cure Foundation helped her by providing her with a sewing machine. In 2014, Lejla’s house, in a remote village near Vareš, was partially destroyed by flooding. The Cure Foundation came to her aid by raising funds to help repair her...
house, but more money is still needed before the work can begin

Ameha Mekonnen, an Ethiopian former civil servant turned human rights lawyer, helps journalists facing censorship from government authorities. His daily life is a constant and dangerous fight to defend the freedoms of thought, expression and the right to criticise, demonstrate and object. Photographed by Enri Canaj.

Natnael Feleqe a 30-year-old, blogger, spent one year and six months in prison. "I was lucky," he said after being released and having his case concluded. He said he still has to be careful because he can be arrested again, as some of his other colleagues were arrested for a second time with no charges. Getachew Shiferaw, aged 32, was arrested on several occasions for his articles. His case is still being heard and he is represented by the lawyer Ameha Mekonnen.

Since 1988 the European Parliament has been awarding the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought to individuals and organisations that have made an exceptional contribution to the fight for human rights.

Photo exhibition

The photo exhibition "They defend our freedoms - 30 years of the Sakharov Prize" with more than 100 photos gives the opportunity to follow the daily fight of those activists and to reflect on the importance of devoting one’s life in defending human rights. It will be shown across the EU in 2018.

The exhibition is currently being shown in Strasbourg at Lieu d’Europe and the train station until 12 February 2018.

Find out more
Sakharov Prize website
Sakharov Prize network
Book on the 30th anniversary
Street theatre: the play concerns the revolution of 2011 and the violence that followed it. ©Newsha Tavakolian/Magnum Photos, 2017
Children, mostly from Kui community at school in Anlong Srey, Preah Vihea province. ©Jérôme Sessini/Magnum Photos, 2017