

# Oleg Sentsov

2018 Sakharov Prize laureate



© Sergei Vanyarsky/Getty Images

## EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT THINK TANK – TOPICAL DIGEST

November 2019

*The promotion and protection of human rights is a core and founding value of the EU. Awarded annually since 1988, the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought is one of the actions through which the European Parliament supports human rights. The prize is awarded to individuals who have made an exceptional contribution to the fight for human rights across the globe, with the aim of drawing attention to human rights violations, as well as supporting the laureates and their causes. Last year's Sakharov prize laureate, Oleg Sentsov (born 1976), is a Ukrainian film director, who was detained on 10 May 2014 in Simferopol, Crimea, and sentenced to 20 years in prison on charges of plotting terrorist acts against Russian de facto rule in Crimea. Amnesty International described the court process as 'an unfair trial before a military court'. Sentsov was sentenced because he opposed the illegal and forced annexation of part of his country by its belligerent neighbour, which was a blatant violation both of international law, and of Russia's international and bilateral commitments. His conviction became a powerful symbol of the fate of approximately 70 Ukrainian citizens illegally arrested and convicted to long prison sentences by the Russian occupying forces in the Crimean peninsula following its annexation. Sentsov was liberated on 7 September 2019 through a prisoner swap between Russia and Ukraine. The following publications of the European Parliament's Research Service and the Policy Departments provide background information and analysis on the core principles of human rights.*

### On the Sakharov Prize:

#### [Oleg Sentsov: The 2018 Sakharov Prize laureate](#)

*'At a glance' note by Naja Bentzen and Ionel Zamfir, European Parliamentary Research Service, October 2019.*

Thirty years since it was first awarded, the European Parliament's Sakharov Prize for freedom of thought retains all its symbolic meaning, as human rights are continually under threat in many parts of the world. By awarding the 2018 Prize to the Ukrainian filmmaker Oleg Sentsov, Parliament aimed to increase the pressure on the Russian government to release him. The award also drew attention to all Ukrainian political prisoners in Russia and the annexed Crimean peninsula. On 7 September 2019, Sentsov was released as part of a major prisoner swap between Russia and Ukraine. He is expected to receive the award in person in Strasbourg in November 2019.

#### [Sakharov Prize: Voices of humanity](#)

*'At a glance' note by Ionel Zamfir, European Parliamentary Research Service, May 2018*

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.

#### [30 Years of the Sakharov Prize: The European Parliament upholding freedom of thought](#)

*Study by Päivi Vaniomäki and Étienne Deschamps, Historical Archives Unit, EPRS, May 2018*

This study, produced from archival material held by Parliament, looks first at the process by which the Sakharov Prize was instituted by the Parliament in the 1980s, at the decision to name it after Soviet dissident Andrei Sakharov,

and at the conditions established for its award. It then looks at the short-lists and winners over each of the past 30 years, and features photos of the award ceremonies.

## **On EU support for human rights:**

### **EU policies – Delivering for citizens: Human Rights**

*Briefing by Martina Prpic, Rosamund Shreeves and Ionel Zamfir, European Parliamentary Research Service, November 2018*

The pivotal role of human rights, and their moral, legal and political significance in the international arena, are indisputable 70 years after the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the first international document to set common standards for all states. However, despite a lot of progress in many areas in terms of recognition, codification and implementation, human rights have more recently come under increased attack from various angles. Illiberal forces aspiring to power, and entrenched authoritarian regimes, often attempt to undermine human rights and those who defend them. This briefing seeks to set out the EU's approach in order to strengthen its role and image as a normative power that will inspire others through its example.

### **EU support for human rights defenders around the world**

*Briefing by Ionel Zamfir, European Parliamentary Research Service, November 2018*

Human rights defenders (HRD) operate in an increasingly restrictive environment, and face a growing number of threats. The European Parliament has been a long-term advocate for a comprehensive EU policy on HRD and has actively contributed to its shaping. This briefing summarises EU policy on HRD and provides examples of EU action. It also elaborates on the European Parliament's role through the award of the Sakharov Prize.

### **EU policies – Delivering for citizens: EU support for democracy and peace in the world**

*Briefing by Ionel Zamfir, European Parliamentary Research Service, October 2018*

From the outset, the European Union has been an integration project directed at preserving peace among its Member States – a fundamental objective that it has succeeded in achieving for over 60 years. Strengthening peace and democracy globally has never been an easy task, however, and today's geopolitical context poses new challenges. The proliferation and increasing gravity and duration of conflicts – some in the EU's immediate neighbourhood, the emergence of new threats, such as terrorism and nuclear proliferation, and the crisis of liberal systems have driven the EU to widen and intensify its efforts. They have also led to a new vision for action, revolving around the concept of 'resilient societies' based on the mutually reinforcing pillars of peace and democracy, and a special emphasis on fragile states. This briefing explores citizens' expectations with regard to the EU in its role as promotor of peace and democracy externally.

### **The European Parliament's evolving soft power – From back-door diplomacy to agenda-setting: Democracy support and mediation**

*Briefing by Naja Bentzen and Beatrix Immenkamp, European Parliamentary Research Service, September 2019*

Over recent decades, the European Parliament has significantly raised its profile as a credible moral force with strong focus on strengthening human rights, supporting democracy and enhancing the rule of law worldwide. Perhaps less visible than the European Parliament's Sakharov Prize for freedom of thought, the European Parliament's democracy support activities are part of its 'soft-power' approach to international relations. Moreover, Parliament can convey messages through channels that are different from, and complementary to, those employed by the EU's traditional diplomatic players; for example, through its parliamentary networks.

### **Human rights in EU trade agreements: The human rights clause and its application**

*Briefing by Ionel Zamfir, European Parliamentary Research Service, July 2019*

The practice of linking human rights with trade liberalisation has gained ground among many trade partners. The main mechanism for incorporating human rights into the EU's bilateral agreements consists of an 'essential elements' human rights clause that enables one party to take appropriate measures in case of serious breaches by the other party. So far, the EU has clearly preferred a constructive engagement to more restrictive measures, and has not activated the clause to suspend trade preferences under any of its trade agreements. Civil society and the European Parliament have, on the other hand, encouraged the European Commission to use such clauses in a more robust way in order to respond to serious breaches of human rights and democratic principles.

## **Human rights in EU trade policy: Unilateral measures applied by the EU**

*Briefing by Ionel Zamfir, European Parliamentary Research Service, May 2018*

One of the EU's main tools to promote human rights in third countries is the generalised system of preferences (GSP), granting certain developing countries preferential trade access to the EU market. Covering 90 third countries, the scheme includes explicit human rights conditionality, providing that preferences can be withdrawn in case of massive and systematic violations of core human rights or labour rights norms. Suspension of preferences under GSP has been applied in only a few cases and, when it was, did not have an immediate and clear impact on the human rights situation. In practice, the EU has privileged a strategy of incentivising gradual progress through dialogue and monitoring, rather than withdrawing preferences. The EU's unilateral trade measures to protect human rights are not limited to the GSP. The EU has taken steps to prohibit or limit trade in items that could cause human rights violations, such as torture and execution equipment, and dual use goods.

## **EU sanctions: A key foreign and security policy instrument**

*Briefing by Martin Russell, European Parliamentary Research Service, May 2018*

Sanctions have become an increasingly central element of the EU's common and foreign security policy. The declared purpose of EU sanctions is to uphold the international security order as well as defending human rights and democracy standards, by encouraging targeted countries to change their behaviour. Measuring their effectiveness is difficult, as sanctions rarely achieve all their aims, and usually there are other causes to which changes can be attributed. However, even when this primary purpose is not achieved, sanctions may have useful secondary effects, for example by deterring other actors from similar behaviour.

## **On international human rights instruments:**

### **The Universal Declaration of Human Rights and its relevance for the European Union**

*'At a glance' note by Ionel Zamfir, European Parliamentary Research Service, November 2018*

Seventy years after its adoption, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights has achieved all the significance its drafters had hoped for. It has served as the foundation for the legal codification of human rights, at global, regional and national levels. Even if non-binding in nature, it has had a significant role in shaping many national constitutions, and many of its provisions have been incorporated into customary international law. This note shows the important role of the UDHR in guiding EU external policies and its use as a reference for EU legislation.

### **Towards a binding international treaty on business and human rights**

*Briefing by Ionel Zamfir, European Parliamentary Research Service, October 2018*

To prevent human rights abuses by transnational corporations, the UN established an intergovernmental working group in 2014, to draft a binding treaty on human rights and business. After warning of the danger of undermining the UN Guiding Principles at the outset, the EU is now a strong advocate for a treaty encompassing all businesses, not only transnational ones. However, the treaty remains controversial. This briefing gives an overview of the debate and discusses the proposed treaty and stakeholders' positions.

### **International Criminal Court: Achievements and challenges 20 years after the adoption of the Rome Statute**

*Briefing by Ionel Zamfir, European Parliamentary Research Service, July 2018*

The International Criminal Court (ICC) has conducted investigations and trials in connection with some of the world's most brutal conflicts, and has not shied away from investigating even at the highest level of power. However, the Court has encountered difficulties and inherent limitations: atrocities committed by groups such as ISIL/Da'esh have been out of its reach, and the unwillingness of some states to join or cooperate have put strain on its authority. This briefing outlines the Court's structure, its main challenges and the EU's support.

### **United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC)**

*'At a glance' note by Joanna Apap, European Parliamentary Research Service, March 2018*

In the 12 years of its existence, the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) has actively defended human rights worldwide. Its robust mandate and set of unique mechanisms, such as universal periodic review and special procedures, provide a system for prevention, technical assistance and capacity-building, as well as a mechanism to respond to cases of grave violations of human rights. This note outlines the UNHRC's mandate, structure and functioning.

## Further reading

### [Major sporting events versus human rights: Parliament's position on the 1978 FIFA World Cup in Argentina and the 1980 Moscow Olympics](#)

Briefing by Christian Salm, Historical Archives Unit, European Parliamentary Research Service, June 2018

### [Freedom of conscience around the world](#)

Briefing by Philippe Perchoc, European Parliamentary Research Service, April 2018

### [Religion and human rights](#)

Briefing by Martina Prpic, European Parliamentary Research Service, November 2018

### [The 2017 Sakharov Prize](#)

'At a glance' note by Enrique Gomez and Ionel Zamfir, European Parliamentary Research Service, December 2017

### [Sakharov Prize Finalists 2017](#)

Briefing by European Parliament's Policy Department for External Policies, December 2017

### [Democracy support in EU external policy](#)

Briefing by Ionel Zamfir, European Parliamentary Research Service, February 2018

### [Arbitrary detention of women and children for immigration-related purposes](#)

Briefing by Joanna Apap, European Parliamentary Research Service, March 2016

### [Towards a comprehensive EU protection system for minorities](#)

Study by European Parliament's Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs, August 2017

### [Sakharov Prize 2016: Fighting conflict-related sexual violence](#)

Briefing by Ionel Zamfir, European Parliamentary Research Service, December 2016

### [The 2015 Sakharov Prize](#)

'At a glance' note by Ionel Zamfir, European Parliamentary Research Service, December 2015

### [Sakharov Prize 2014: Tending the scars of sexual violence in Democratic Republic of Congo](#)

'At a glance' note by Marta Latek, European Parliamentary Research Service, November 2014

### [The European Parliament's Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought, 1988-2013 - A Quarter Century's Engagement in Human Rights](#)

Study by European Parliament's Policy Department for External Policies, December 2013

### [Indivisibility of Human Rights: Unifying the two Covenants on Human Rights?](#)

'At a glance' note by Joanna Apap, European Parliamentary Research Service, November 2018

### [Expansion of the concept of human rights: Impact on rights promotion and protection](#)

Study by European Parliament's Policy Department for External Policies, March 2018

---

You can access this Topical Digest at  
[http://www.europarl.europa.eu/EPRS/TD\\_Sakharov\\_Prize\\_2019\\_final.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/EPRS/TD_Sakharov_Prize_2019_final.pdf)  
or by scanning the QR code.  
More information on the Europarl website:  
<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sakharovprize/en/home/the-prize.html>

