

2020 Sakharov Prize laureate: The democratic opposition in Belarus

At a time when authoritarianism is rising, the Sakharov Prize draws attention to the situation of those who resist the repression of human rights and fundamental freedoms. This year, the prize is to be awarded to the democratic opposition in Belarus, represented by the Coordination Council. It rewards its courageous and peaceful role in opposing the falsification of the August 2020 elections, despite a brutal crackdown by the authorities. The Sakharov Prize will be presented in a ceremony during the European Parliament's December plenary session.

Significance of the Sakharov Prize

Every year, since 1988, the European Parliament has awarded the [Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought](#) to individuals or organisations for outstanding achievement in defending human rights and fundamental freedoms – notably the right to freedom of expression, safeguarding the rights of minorities, upholding international law, developing democracy, and implementing the rule of law. Initiated by a 1985 parliamentary resolution, the prize is named after Andrei Sakharov, the eminent Soviet-Russian nuclear physicist, 1975 Nobel Peace Prize winner, dissident and human rights activist.

Award procedure and the 2020 Sakharov Prize finalists and laureate

Political groups, or [at least 40 Members](#) of the European Parliament, [nominate](#) the candidates for the Sakharov Prize. From the list of [nominees](#), three finalists are then shortlisted by Members in a joint vote of the Committees on Foreign Affairs and Development, as well as the Subcommittee on Human Rights.

The three finalists for the 2020 Sakharov Prize were: **the democratic opposition in Belarus**, represented by the [Coordination Council](#), an initiative of [brave women](#) and other political and civil society figures; **Guapinol activists and Berta Cáceres** in Honduras – an [environmental group](#) peacefully protesting against mining activities polluting local rivers, whose members were either imprisoned or murdered (Berta Cáceres in March 2016 and, most recently, Arnold Joaquin Morazán Erazo in October 2020); and **Monsignor Najeeb Michael, Archbishop of Mosul**, Iraq – who ensured the [evacuation](#) of Christians, Syriacs and Chaldeans to Iraqi Kurdistan and [safeguarded](#) more than 800 historic manuscripts, written in Aramaic, Syriac, Arabic and Armenian, thus saving both people's lives and their historical heritage.

On 22 October 2020, Parliament's Conference of Presidents announced the decision to honour the democratic opposition in Belarus with the 2020 Sakharov Prize. The opposition is represented by the Coordination Council, which comprises opposition candidate [Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya](#), Nobel Laureate Svetlana Alexievich, musician and political activist Maryia Kalesnikava, political activists Volha Kavalkova and Veranika Tsapkala, video blogger and political prisoner Siarhei Tsikhanouski, Ales Bialiatski, founder of [Viasna](#), a Belarusian human rights organisation, Siarhei Dyleuski, the leader of the Minsk Tractor Works strike committee, Stsiapan Putsila, founder of the Telegram channel [NEXTA](#), and Mikola Statkevich, political prisoner and presidential candidate in the 2010 election.

Announcing the decision, Parliament's President, David Sassoli, [congratulated](#) the representatives of the Belarusian opposition 'for their courage, resilience and determination', adding that 'even if the adversary is much stronger, the truth is on their side'. President Sassoli encouraged the laureates 'to stay strong and not to give up' on their fight. The democratic opposition is the third Sakharov prize laureate from Belarus. The previous two were the [Belarusian Association of Journalists](#) in 2004, and [Aliaksandr Milinkevich](#), a democratic opposition candidate during the 2006 presidential elections.

Democratic opposition in Belarus represented by the Coordination Council

After 26 years of Aliaksandr Lukashenka's presidency and previous attempts to democratise their state, Belarusians tried once more to change their president in 2020. On 9 August, Lukashenka, the incumbent

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president (often referred to in the [media](#) as Europe's 'last dictator'), again stood as a candidate in the presidential elections. Conversely, Viktor Babaryka and Siarhei Tsikhanouski were [refused](#) the right to stand in the election, and were arrested. Valer Tsapkala's candidacy was also refused and he fled the country. Subsequently, the Lukashenka regime permitted Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya to run in the elections. Many commentators consider that this was due to Lukashenka's conviction that Belarusians would not support a female candidate. Prior to the election, Lukashenka [claimed](#) that the strong presidential powers provided in the Belarusian Constitution mean that women are unfit to be president. However, the Belarusian people decided differently and gave Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya broad support, with independent exit polls showing her as winning with an absolute majority of votes. Nevertheless, the official results stated that Lukashenka had won the election with over 80 % of the votes. In response, Belarusians staged strikes, demonstrations and women's marches in [protest](#) against the electoral fraud. The police responded with brutal crackdowns, torture, arrests and sexual violence. The murder of protesters fuelled further protest and was condemned internationally.

Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya was forced into exile on 11 August 2020, and while in the Lithuanian capital, Vilnius, established the Coordination Council on 19 August. The [Coordination Council's aim](#) is to facilitate the transfer of power through negotiation, without changing the Belarusian constitutional order or foreign policy. The Coordination Council expressed three demands: end violence and political persecution by the authorities and conduct an investigation into human rights abuses; release all political prisoners, annul all illegal court decisions and provide monetary compensation to victims; and conduct new presidential elections based on international standards, with newly formed electoral commissions. The Coordination Council stated that, until these demands are met, the 'Belarusian people will continue to exercise their civil rights guaranteed by the Constitution'. The findings of an October 2020 [OSCE report](#) support the Coordination Council demands, calling for a re-run of the election, 'due to irregularities at all stages of the process'.

Belarus government actions against democratic opposition

Several Coordination Council members were either [forced into exile or were arrested](#). Two out of seven members of the Coordination Council [Board](#), [Mariya Kalesnikava](#) and [Maksim Znack](#) remained under arrest in mid-November. They are not the only ones to have been arrested. During the first four days of protests alone, some 6 700 people were arrested, and many are still detained. The [OSCE report](#) testifies that there were massive and systematic human rights abuses around events related to the Belarus presidential elections, stating that 'the torture or inhuman and degrading treatment was intentional as it was widespread and systematic as well as targeted at the opposing protesters ... It followed a systematic and widespread pattern including Minsk and other cities'. The report finds it particularly concerning that those responsible for well-documented cases of torture and ill-treatment have not been held accountable, thereby confirming allegations of general impunity.

Demonstrations continue to take place each Sunday, with thousands of people arrested [each month](#). According to reports, on 12 November, undercover police killed opposition supporter, [Raman Bandarenka](#).

European Union position

The EU has expressed [solidarity](#) with Belarusians, condemned the violence against protesters and called for the immediate release of detained persons and for an inclusive national dialogue. The EU and its institutions do not recognise the election results and state that Lukashenka lacks any democratic legitimacy.

The European Council introduced [sanctions](#) against individuals responsible for repression and election falsification. As of 6 November, [Lukashenka](#) has been included in the list of officials subject to travel bans and asset freezes.

Since [August 2020](#), the European Parliament has frequently [invited](#) representatives of the Coordination Council to [discuss](#) the situation of [Belarusians](#). Svetlana Tsikhanouskaya met President Sassoli on 21 September, the day on which the European Parliament's Committee on Foreign Affairs recommended the [recognition](#) of the Coordination Council 'as the legitimate representative of the people demanding democratic change and freedom in Belarus'.

