

# Sakharov Prize laureates in difficulty

## Facing repression for defending human rights

### SUMMARY

The Sakharov Prize is awarded by the European Parliament each year for outstanding achievements in the service of human rights. Defending human rights in countries where they are most under pressure does however come with significant risks for defenders, who are often harassed, persecuted, and deprived of personal freedom. Since its beginning, the Prize has been awarded to human rights defenders, some of whom were behind bars, serving long prison sentences because of their fight, such as Nelson Mandela. This has not changed much today. Several Sakharov laureates of recent years were in jail when they were awarded the Prize and are still not free today. Others suffered new or additional prison terms because of their activity.

The Sakharov Prize brings the cause and the fight of its laureates to world attention. On the occasion of awarding the Prize, Parliament, through the voice of its President, usually calls for jailed laureates to be released from prison. Parliament also uses all the means in its parliamentary diplomacy toolbox to protect from state repression those that it honours through the Prize. The steady follow-up by Parliament of the situation of Sakharov laureates and the urgency resolutions which mention those in difficulty regularly help to keep their struggle in the spotlight. EU diplomacy complements Parliament's efforts through statements, dialogues, and démarches, in line with the general EU policy on protecting human rights defenders.

While such actions add to international pressure to secure the release of human rights defenders, they do not always succeed in moving repressive regimes. 2019 saw the liberation of Oleg Sentsov, the Ukrainian film-maker who received the Prize in 2018, from a Russian jail, but other countries such as China, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Cuba, and Venezuela have been relentless in their repression of Sakharov laureates, not giving in to EU calls for their liberation. The ongoing coronavirus pandemic puts jailed laureates at particular risk, but none of those in prison has benefited from the conditional release awarded on a large scale to common criminals, for example in Iran.



*Sakharov Prize award ceremony, 2019.*

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## Background – Fighting for freedom at great personal risk

According to its statute, the Sakharov Prize for freedom of thought rewards individuals or organisations for their outstanding achievements in one of the following fields: defence of human rights and fundamental freedoms – particularly the right to freedom of expression, safeguarding of the rights of minorities, respect for international law, development of democracy, and implementation of the rule of law. Often, such outstanding work in the service of human rights comes at considerable risk to activists' life and freedom. In the 31 years over which the Prize has been awarded, numerous laureates<sup>1</sup> have suffered restrictions on their freedom – or attacks on their life – before or after the Prize was awarded to them. Imprisonment, house arrest, or travel bans have prevented many of them from attending the award ceremony in Strasbourg (see Table 1).

Table 1 – Laureates prevented from attending the award ceremony due to restrictions on their freedom

Laureates	Year	Country	Restrictions on freedom
Ilham Thoti	2019	China	imprisoned
Oleg Sentsov	2018	Ukraine	Imprisoned in Russia
Democratic Opposition in Venezuela	2017	Venezuela	many of them imprisoned
Raif Badawi	2015	Saudi Arabia	imprisoned
Nasrin Sotoudeh	2012	Iran	imprisoned and on hunger strike
Jafar Panahi	2012	Iran	free, but under a prison sentence and a travel ban
Razan Zaitouneh	2011	Syria	living in hiding after fleeing a raid by security forces
Guillermo Fariñas	2010	Cuba	travel ban
Hu Jia	2008	China	imprisoned
Wei Jingsheng	1996	China	imprisoned
Leyla Zana	1995	Turkey	imprisoned
Aung San Suu Kyi	1990	Burma/Myanmar	under house arrest
Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela	1988	South Africa	imprisoned

Source: [Sakharov Prize laureates, European Parliament website](#).

Some laureates who were actually free when the Prize was awarded to them had been in jail previously, such as Ahmed El Senussi (2011), Libya's longest-serving prisoner of conscience under Ghadafi. Ali Ferzat (2011) – Syrian cartoonist – and Malala Yousafzai (2013) – Pakistani advocate for education rights – had suffered attacks so severe that they almost lost their lives. Nadia Murad and Lamyia Haji Bashar (2016) – Yazidi women and advocates for the recognition of sexual violence in war – had been enslaved by Jihadists in Iraq. Taslima Nasreen, a Bangladeshi writer, had to flee her country because of death threats.

The Sakharov Prize brings to global public attention the plight of these people and the causes for which they fight, providing them encouragement during difficult times. It also catalyses EU diplomatic efforts to ensure that their basic rights are respected. In those cases where the activist's

fight has produced positive results, with their country making a transition towards democracy, Sakharov laureates have often become important public figures, parliamentarians, or even heads of state or government, such as Nelson Mandela – first president of post-Apartheid South Africa, Xanana Gusmão – first president of independent East Timor, Alexander Dubček – chair of the federal parliament of Czechoslovakia between 1989-1992, and Aung San Suu Kyi – current prime minister of Myanmar. For others such as Salih Mahmoud Mohamed Osman, Nadia Murad, Lamya Haji Bashar, and Denis Mukwege,<sup>2</sup> the Prize serves as an encouragement for their continuing work in the promotion of human rights. Others still are made to feel the full repressive force of the regimes under which they live, being forced to pay a heavy price for their courage. This is today particularly the case with China – where among the three Sakharov laureates one is in jail, one under frequent house arrest, and one in forced exile abroad; Venezuela – where many political opponents are arrested, imprisoned, or exiled; and Saudi Arabia and Iran – where Sakharov laureates are serving long jail terms and face torture. In these countries, international pressure has not led to the release of prisoners of conscience. In a world of increasing geopolitical competition, the situation of human rights activists raises [new questions](#) about what the EU should do to reconcile its fundamental commitment to human rights with its pursuit of cooperation with powerful partners such as China, which do not necessarily share the same commitment to universal human rights.

## Sakharov laureates in difficulty

During 2019 and early 2020,<sup>3</sup> numerous Sakharov laureates faced significant difficulty related to their work – from long jail sentences to various forms of harassment by authorities or different interest groups. The following list does not pretend to be exhaustive, as some laureates may face difficulties that go unreported. Also, in cases where the Prize is awarded to organisations, often numerous individuals linked to the organisation may face repression.

### Imprisoned for their work

In 2019, the Prize was again awarded to a human rights defender imprisoned for his work. Uyghur human rights defender and economics professor [Ilham Tohti](#) was awarded the Prize *in absentia* on 18 December 2019. His daughter, Jewher Ilham, represented him at the award ceremony in Strasbourg. On that occasion, the President of the European Parliament, David Sassoli, called on the Chinese authorities to release him immediately and for the release of all other imprisoned Sakharov laureates. Professor Tohti was arrested on 15 January 2014 and has been in jail ever since, sentenced to life in prison on separatism-related charges. Tohti is a well-known defender of the rights of the Uyghur minority in China, a voice of moderation and an advocate for dialogue and better understanding between the Han majority and the Uyghurs. According to [Frontline Defenders](#), he has been subjected to 'recurring violations of international human rights standards with regard to detention conditions such as limitations of family visits, intercepted communication, solitary confinement, deprivation of food and intimidation'. According to the same source, Tohti's family and colleagues have also been subjected to judicial harassment. When receiving the Sakharov Prize, his [daughter](#) declared that she did not know whether her father was still alive. China is known for treating political opponents harshly and for not giving in to international pressure. Liu Xiaobo, Chinese Nobel Peace Prize laureate, died in prison in 2017 after being refused transfer to an appropriate medical [facility](#). China sharply criticised Parliament's [decision](#) to award the Sakharov Prize to Tohti, as a way of 'celebrating a terrorist.'

In 2019, **Raif Badawi**, a liberal Saudi blogger and 2015 laureate, saw the continuation of his prison ordeal, having twice gone on [hunger strike](#) to protest against his increasingly severe ill-treatment in prison. Raif Badawi was sentenced to 10 years in prison and 1 000 lashes<sup>4</sup> for blasphemy and apostasy. His first hunger strike, in September 2019, was meant to protest at his lack of access to medication and books. It ended a few days later, on 22 September, with a visit by the head of the Saudi Human Rights Commission. However, in December 2019, he went on [hunger strike](#) again, this time joined by his lawyer, Waleed Abulkhair, to protest against their solitary confinement and ill-

treatment in the prison. Abulkhair is serving a 15-year sentence for defending Badawi and other human rights activists. They ended the [hunger strike](#) after being taken out of solitary confinement. In January 2020, they had to be transferred to hospital.

The coronavirus pandemic puts people in jail at particular risk. Political prisoners are often held in overcrowded and unsanitary conditions, without sufficient access to medical care. Given this situation, there have been calls on governments for their release, such as from the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet,<sup>5</sup> or from human rights organisations (e.g. [Amnesty International](#)). None of the cases referred to in this briefing has seen a release on health-related grounds.

After the recognition of Juan Guaidó as Venezuela's interim president by numerous countries around the world, including several EU Member States, repression against the **Venezuelan opposition** by the regime of Nicolas Maduro intensified. The country's [opposition](#) and political prisoners were awarded the Sakharov Prize in 2017. In the decision, special mention was made of Julio Borges – President of the National Assembly – and the political prisoners Leopoldo López, Antonio Ledezma, Daniel Ceballos, Yon Goicoechea, Lorent Saleh, Alfredo Ramos, and Andrea González – listed by the Foro Penal Venezolano, a platform collecting data on political prisoners.

Julio Borges lives in [exile](#) in Colombia. The Venezuelan government asked for his extradition in 2018. At the beginning of May 2019, Venezuelan opposition leader Leopoldo López, together with his wife Lilian Tintori and their daughter, sought refuge<sup>6</sup> in the Spanish Embassy in Caracas, where he remains to this day. López had been freed from house arrest in April during the mass protests that took place in Caracas. His family later moved to Spain. According to the [Foro Penal Venezolano](#), at the beginning of June 2020, there were 451 political prisoners in Venezuelan prisons, many of whom were arrested during protests against the Maduro government. Opposition parliamentarians have suffered numerous [violations of their rights](#), such as attacks and harassment, suspension from parliament, restrictions of movement and judicial proceedings, in breach of their immunity. As a consequence, 29 Members of Parliament from opposition parties have gone into exile – for example, [Antonio Ledezma](#) and [Lorent Saleh](#), who are now in Spain.

In March 2019, an Iranian court handed down a very harsh sentence to human rights lawyer **Nasrin Sotoudeh** in a trial considered unfair by [UN experts](#). She was sentenced, according to [media reports](#), to a combined 38 years in jail and 148 lashes. Sotoudeh, who had defended opposition activists, including women prosecuted for removing their mandatory headscarf, was arrested in June 2018 and held in the women's section of [Evin Prison](#), which is notorious for the ill-treatment of political inmates. Sotoudeh refused to attend her trial, as she was not allowed to choose her own defence counsel. She had been jailed in 2010, but was released after serving half of her six-year term. The European Parliament awarded her the Sakharov Prize in 2012, while she was in jail. Her current imprisonment puts Sotoudeh at particular risk during the pandemic. Iran has been among the hardest hit countries. The government temporarily released tens of thousands of common criminals, but it has kept many political prisoners in jail. Sotoudeh suffers from underlying medical conditions, and the 'inadequate medical facilities and a lack of basic hygiene and sanitary equipment in Evin prison' are a special concern for her.<sup>7</sup>

Members of the Cuban platform **Damas de Blanco**, laureates of the 2005 Prize, have been regularly jailed in Cuba in connection with their public protests. Las Damas de Blanco are well known for marching silently and dressed in white every week on the streets of Havana in protest against political motivated arrest and imprisonment of various dissidents. According to an [organisation](#) collecting data on political prisoners in Cuba, of the 74 prisoners of conscience recorded in May 2020, two were members of Damas de Blanco and one was under house arrest.

## Imprisoned but released during 2019

The year 2019 also witnessed some positive developments. [Olev Sentsov](#), Ukrainian film director and 2018 laureate, convicted in Russia to 20 years in prison for his opposition to the annexation of Crimea, was liberated in an exchange of prisoners between Russia and Ukraine. In May 2018, he

began a 145-day hunger strike, demanding the release of all Ukrainians held on political grounds in Russia and annexed Crimea. On 7 September 2019, Ukrainian prisoners in Russia were exchanged for 35 prisoners held in Ukraine, in a move generally hailed by European leaders, including the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HV/HR). Sentsov was able to travel to Strasbourg to receive the Prize in person in November 2019.

**Salih Osman**, 2007 laureate, was arrested on 8 January 2019 in Sudan in the context of a violent crackdown on anti-government protesters. Osman had been detained repeatedly by the Sudanese government for his human rights work. Soon afterwards, mass protests sparked by the government's decision to raise the price of bread succeeded in toppling long-time authoritarian ruler Omar al-Bashir, launching a political transition in Sudan. In this context, Salih Osman was liberated from prison in April 2019. He travelled to Brussels and participated in an [exchange of views](#) with the European Parliament's DROI Subcommittee in October 2019.

## Subject to various bans and harassed

The 1995 Sakharov laureate, Leyla Zana, the first Kurdish woman to become a member of the Turkish Parliament, was stripped in 2018 of her lawmaker status due to parliamentary absences. Leyla Zana pronounced her inauguration [oath](#) in Kurdish in November 2015, leading the speaker to rule her oath invalid. In the past, Zana had spent many years in prison. In 1994 she was sentenced to 15 years of incarceration because of her peaceful advocacy for the dignity and rights of the Kurdish people in Turkey.

In April 2008, shortly before being chosen as that year's laureate, **Hu Jia**, a prominent Chinese human rights activist and leading advocate for the rights of the persons living with HIV/AIDS, was sentenced to three and a half years in [prison](#) for 'inciting subversion of state power.' He had already been taken to jail when the Prize was awarded to him. Since his release, he has spent years under repeated [house arrest](#). According to media reports, some time before 4 June 2019 – 30th anniversary of the Chinese government's crackdown on pro-democracy protests in Tiananmen Square – Hu Jia was 'taken on a mandatory holiday to Qinhuangdao, a port city almost 200 miles from his home in Beijing', where he remained under police surveillance. In 2020, his [movements](#) were again restricted at the time of the anniversary. During a three-day meeting of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party in Beijing in October 2019, he and other dissidents were prevented from leaving their [apartments](#). Hu Jia is constantly under [police surveillance](#) and is often forced to go on trips under police supervision outside the capital (for instance, in February, June, and October 2019).

**Memorial**, a Russian NGO and 2009 laureate, was repeatedly [fined](#) in recent months for not including the phrase '[foreign agent](#)' on all its publications. The organisation was sanctioned for violations of Russian [legislation on NGOs](#), which requires all NGOs conducting political activity and receiving funding from abroad to register as foreign agents.

In 2011, Parliament awarded the Prize to several individuals whom it considered to epitomise the Arab Spring. Egyptian activist **Asmaa Mahfouz** was among the laureates. She was honoured for posting calls on social media for Egyptians to protest peacefully against the Mubarak regime, sparking the mass protests that toppled his authoritarian government. Today, she cannot enjoy the freedom for which she fought. In 2018, she was barred from travelling to [Brussels](#) on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the Sakharov Prize. She remains under a [travel ban](#) and constant police surveillance.

Iranian film director and 2012 laureate **Jafar Panahi** is subject to a [20-year ban](#) on film-making, screenwriting, and travelling outside his country, at the risk of arrest.

Algerian laureate **Salima Ghezali** resigned from the National Parliamentary Assembly – where she had been a Member since 2017 – on 23 September 2019 in protest against the [incapacity](#) of state institutions, political parties, and the mass media to bring about change in the country. Her resignation occurred in the tense aftermath of the mass protests in Algeria. Ghezali was excluded from her party, the Front des Forces Socialistes, after she published an article without its approval, in which she argued that the civilian component of Algerian politics should have primacy over the military one.

Cuban laureates **Guillermo Fariñas** and members of **Damas en Blanco** also suffer frequent forms of harassment. Berta Soler, from Damas en Blanco, was barred from traveling to Brussels on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the Sakharov Prize in June 2018. [Fariñas](#), a leading Cuban dissident and 2010 laureate who spent numerous years in prison and went on several hunger strikes, was arrested at the beginning of [February 2020](#) for leading a [campaign](#) against the EU-Cuba agreement. At the time of his arrest, Fariñas was applying for a visa to Europe, where he was planning to hold meetings, namely in Spain and Brussels – with the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the DROI Subcommittee in the European Parliament. After his arrest, EP Vice-President, Heidi Hautala, and the Chair of the DROI Subcommittee, Maria Arena, issued a [statement](#) calling on Cuban authorities to respect his rights and allow him to travel. He was released a few days later and was finally able to travel. He participated in the DROI meeting later that month. A few months prior to his arrest, at the end of 2019, Fariñas had expressed his [opposition](#) to the new EU cooperation agreement with Cuba during a visit to Lithuania. [Lithuania](#) is the only [EU country](#)<sup>8</sup> that has not yet ratified the agreement. Rejection by one Member State would put an end to provisional application and oblige the EU to reassess it. According to Fariñas, there had recently been an increase in violence against, and detentions of, human rights activists and opposition politicians in Cuba.

## Missing

**Razan Zaitouneh**, 2011 laureate, is still missing in Syria. She was abducted on 9 December 2013 together with three other human rights defenders by a group of armed men who raided the offices of the Violations Documentation Centre (VDC) in Douma, Eastern Ghouta, near Damascus. The VDC, established by Zaitouneh herself, documented human rights violations committed by all parties to the Syrian civil war. Zaitouneh was a recognised human rights [defender](#) who had defended political prisoners in Syria since 2001. After the outbreak of the war, she was forced to hide from government forces. At the time of her disappearance, the city of Douma was under the control of rebel forces. According to [witnesses](#), after her kidnapping she may have been held in a prison controlled by Jaish al-Islam, the dominant rebel faction in Douma. When Syrian government forces retook control of the town in April 2018, Zaitouneh was not among the released prisoners, which indicates that she might have died in prison.

## Sakharov Prize nominees in difficulty<sup>9</sup>

Not only those who are awarded the Prize but also many of those who are nominated deserve to be remembered for their courageous fight. The [winner](#) is selected from a list of proposals each made by a political group or by at least 40 members. Three of the nominations are shortlisted as finalists. The list of finalists who were selected because they had faced enormous challenges and risks in their work would be too long to present here. These are just a few representative examples from recent years: Last year's finalists included murdered Brazilian political activist and human rights defender Marielle Franco, a black bisexual woman from a Rio de Janeiro favela. A courageous human rights activist for the rights of the most marginalised, Franco was elected to the legislative assembly of the city of Rio de Janeiro. She was murdered in yet unexplained [circumstances](#). Other finalists endure long-term imprisonment. Dawit Isaak, a Swedish-Eritrean playwright and journalist, first nominated in 2009, became a finalist after his second nomination in 2017. He has been held in an unknown location in Eritrea since 2001 because of his journalistic activism. Since then, there has been no news of him. Nasser Zefzafi, 2018 finalist, remains in prison in Morocco, from where he has [pleaded](#) for his release during the coronavirus pandemic.

## A difficult political environment for many laureates

Numerous laureates continue their activity in repressive environments. As can be seen in Table 2, the vast majority of countries (three quarters) where they work are classified as autocracies based on indicators published by the organisation Varieties of Democracy (V-DEM).<sup>10</sup> Half have a human rights score below 0.5, out of a maximum of 1.0, according to a report by the international organisation IDEA.

Table 2 – Situation of human rights and democracy in the countries of Sakharov Prize laureates (including only activists still alive and organisations still operational)

Sakharov laureate	Year of award	Country	Type of regime (based on V-DEM data)	Fundamental Rights Score (IDEA)
Ilham Tohti	2019	China	Closed autocracy	0.39
Oleg Sentsov	2018	Ukraine	Electoral autocracy	0.5
Democratic Opposition in Venezuela	2017	Venezuela	Electoral autocracy	0.39
Nadia Murad and Lamyia Haji Bashar	2016	Iraq	Electoral autocracy	0.44
Raif Badawi	2015	Saudi Arabia	Closed autocracy	0.34
Denis Mukwege	2014	DRC	Electoral autocracy	0.36
Malala Yousafzai	2013	Pakistan	Electoral autocracy	0.46
Nasrin Sotoudeh and Jafar Panahi	2012	Iran	Electoral autocracy	0.43
Asmaa Mahfouz	2011	Egypt	Electoral autocracy	0.43
Ahmed El Senussi	2011	Libya	Closed autocracy	0.39
Ali Ferzat and Razan Zaitouneh	2011	Syria	Closed autocracy	0.21
Mohamed Bouazizi	2011	Tunisia	Electoral democracy	0.76
Guillermo Fariñas	2010	Cuba	Closed autocracy	0.41
Memorial	2009	Russia	Electoral autocracy	0.45
Hu Jia	2008	China	Closed autocracy	0.39
Salih Mahmoud Mohamed Osman	2007	Sudan	Electoral autocracy	0.31
Aliaksandr Milinkevich	2006	Belarus	Electoral autocracy	0.55
Ladies in White	2005	Cuba	Closed autocracy	0.41
Reporters Without Borders	2005	France	Liberal democracy	0.86
Hauwa Ibrahim	2005	Nigeria	Electoral democracy	0.62
Belarusian Association of Journalists	2004	Belarus	Electoral autocracy	0.55
United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan and all the staff of the UN	2003	World		0.59
Dom Zacarias Kamwenho	2001	Angola	Electoral autocracy	0.51
Nurit Peled Elhanan	2001	Israel	Liberal democracy	0.71
Xanana Gusmão	1999	Timor-Leste	Electoral democracy	0.56
Salima Ghezali	1997	Algeria	Electoral autocracy	0.54
Wei Jingsheng	1996	China	Closed autocracy	0.39
Leyla Zana	1995	Turkey	Electoral autocracy	0.35
Taslina Nasreen	1994	Bangladesh	Electoral autocracy	0.44
Oslobodjenje	1993	Bosnia & Herzegovina	Electoral democracy	0.57
Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo	1992	Argentina	Electoral democracy	0.74
Aung San Suu Kyi	1990	Myanmar	Electoral autocracy	0.49

Data source: [V-Dem Democracy Report 2019, The Global State of Democracy Indices](#) by IDEA International.

## EU and EP support for Sakharov laureates in difficulty

The EU is a strong supporter of human rights defenders around the world, particularly those who are most at risk. Its measures include official statements in reaction to repression suffered by human rights defenders, diplomatic démarches, and emergency aid. The human rights dialogues the EU regularly organises with partner countries are an important opportunity to address the situation of human rights defenders. During such dialogues, the EU raises the situation of Sakharov laureates whenever applicable. For example, the EU holds yearly human rights dialogues with China. During the [2019 dialogue](#) held in April 2019, the EU expressed its expectation that human rights defenders and lawyers would be released, including Ilham Tohti and many others. During the [2018 dialogue](#) held in July 2018 in Beijing, the EU made a similar call for the release of political prisoners. On the occasion of the 2017 dialogue, the then chair of DROI, [Antonio Panzeri](#) (S&D, Italy), urged 'the EU and its Member States to review and sharpen the human rights dialogue with China, with a view to making it more results-oriented, based on clear benchmarks'. With Venezuela, the EU has been involved in substantial efforts to mediate in the political crisis and find a peaceful solution. Enrique Iglesias, a former Uruguayan foreign minister, was appointed [EU special envoy](#) for Venezuela in May 2019. The EU has also held High-level Political Dialogues with Iran. In parallel with [the fourth meeting](#) of the High-level Political Dialogue on 26 November 2018 in Brussels, it held discussions on human rights as an integral part of EU-Iran political dialogue.<sup>11</sup> This followed a similar discussion held in [2017](#).

In addition to actions by the European Parliament, when Sakharov laureates suffer arrest, harsh sentences, or other forms of severe repression, the EU reacts via its High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (VP/HR). When the Iranian human rights lawyer Nasrin Sotoudeh received a harsh prison sentence<sup>12</sup> in 2019 (see above), the VP/HR's spokesperson released a [statement](#) describing the lawyers' imprisonment as 'a worrying development'. The statement condemned the serious irregularities in the trial and asked for an immediate review of her sentence.

The European Parliament has its own tools to draw public attention to the plight of Sakharov laureates and to exhort third countries' governments to comply with their human rights obligations. Parliament adopts urgency resolutions when the human rights situation in a particular country deteriorates, including cases of reprisals against Sakharov laureates. Often, Sakharov laureates are among the first to be targeted when governments try to rein in popular discontent. In its most recent resolution on Iran, from December 2019, entitled [Violent crackdown on recent protests in Iran](#), Parliament 'reiterates its full support for Sakharov Prize laureates Nasrin Sotoudeh and Jafar Panahi; deplores the fact that Nasrin Sotoudeh is still imprisoned, serving a sentence of 33 years and 148 lashes, and insists on her immediate and unconditional release; and calls on the Iranian authorities to lift the travel ban which has been placed on Jafar Panahi since 2010. Parliament had made similar calls in other resolutions in 2019, namely [Iran, notably the situation of women's rights defenders and imprisoned EU dual nationals](#) (September 2019) and [Iran, notably the case of human rights defenders](#) (March 2019), adopted by the previous Parliament. In a similar case in early 2019, Sudanese laureate, Salih Mahmoud Osman, was among the [human rights defenders](#) arrested during a crackdown on popular protests. In its January 2019 [resolution on Sudan](#), Parliament condemned the repression and called for the immediate and unconditional release of Salih Mahmoud Osman.

Parliament also uses [parliamentary diplomacy](#) tools to advocate the release of Sakharov laureates, such as statements or letters by its president. When its committees and delegations make visits abroad or welcome counterparts for joint parliamentary meetings, they often address issues related to human rights defenders.

Parliament aims to keep close relations with former laureates. Their voice is very important for keeping track of human rights violations in the world and for discussing ways to tackle them. The [Sakharov Prize Network](#), composed of laureates of the Sakharov Prize and Members of the European Parliament, was established in 2008 with the goal 'to enhance joint efforts in support of human rights defenders around the world through common actions by the Sakharov Prize winners jointly



and under the aegis of the European Parliament'. It has now been renamed the Sakharov Prize Community. The community helps former laureates to connect with each other and with civil society and to share and learn from each other's experiences in defending human rights, giving a boost to their fight. In addition to regular anniversary and mid-term conferences, the Sakharov Community organises various actions that contribute to the human rights dimension of the European Parliament's comprehensive democracy support activities.

## The Sakharov Prize in a changing environment for human rights defenders

The Sakharov Prize is the highest EU human rights award. It helps put a human face on EU policies and values, and it draws the attention of the media, the public, and the international community to the laureates and their causes. A recognition of outstanding human rights work, the Prize comes with a commitment from Parliament to care for the laureates. This clearly offers them a form of protection from further abuse. But the fame and international attention that come with the Prize also carry some risks. This is especially true in authoritarian countries that ignore international human rights norms, defy diplomatic pressure, and increasingly intensify repression of human rights defenders.

By attracting public attention to the laureates and their fight, the Sakharov Prize can help increase public pressure on governments to release imprisoned laureates or at least to respect their basic legal rights while in prison. Chinese dissident Hu Jia (2008) stated in a 2012 [letter](#) to the EP that the Prize gave him 'encouragement' and 'greatly improved the way [he] was treated in prison'. Speaking to DROI in October 2018, Salih Osman was grateful for Parliament's efforts to release him. The decision to grant the 2018 Sakharov Prize to Oleg Sentsov was considered by [Human Rights Watch](#) as increasing pressure on Russia to release him. The case of each human rights defender is different. Repressive governments' responses to international pressures also varies significantly depending on many factors. A [2013 study](#) commissioned by the European Parliament and based on interviews with laureates found that 'government reactions to the Prize had never been positive, with the only exception of Angola, having varied from ignoring the Prize altogether to protesting against it. A number of governments tried to discredit the laureates by launching purposeful defamation campaigns against them.' China's very negative reaction to the 2019 Sakharov Prize award indicates that this pattern continues today.

While in most cases laureates suffered persecution from their own government, a number of Sakharov laureates, such as Taslima Nasreen, Razan Zaitouneh, Denis Mukwege, Nadia Murad, Lamya Haji Bashar, and Malala Yousafzai have come under threat and even suffered attacks on their life and freedom from non-state actors, such as fundamentalist groups that are less responsive to international pressure.

The plight of many Sakharov laureates has to be considered against the background of a deteriorating environment for human rights defenders in many parts of the world. The shrinking space for civil society has rendered their activity particularly difficult. On the other hand, there have been multiple efforts by the international community and local civil society to better protect them. As the [2018 World Report on the Situation of Human Rights Defenders](#) by Michel Forst – United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights Defenders – states, 'over the past 20 years, a range of innovative practices to support human rights defenders have been developed and spread, [such as the] creation of regional, national, and local networks of support for human rights defenders, the expansion of programmes of protection, such as temporary relocation initiatives, and the development of international civil society organizations, networks, and funding mechanisms to support particularly vulnerable human rights defenders.' Despite all this, the report also finds that the situation of human rights defenders in certain countries, such as those where Sakharov laureates are imprisoned, namely China, Cuba, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Venezuela is particularly worrying. For example, 'all human rights defenders in China face significant risk. [...]

Particularly vulnerable categories of human rights defenders include lawyers working on human rights issues or defending defenders, labour activists, minority rights activists (including Uyghur, Tibetan, and other minority groups), defenders participating in international discussions on China, rural communities opposing pollution, development, and corruption (including land and environmental defenders), and those calling for political reforms.'

The ongoing coronavirus pandemic puts human rights defenders at [particular risk](#). The sweeping restrictions on various freedoms imposed to control the spread of the virus are abused by authoritarian regimes which seek to strengthen their power and silence dissenters. There is a worrying trend in countries that have released ordinary prisoners during the pandemic to keep human rights defenders in jail.<sup>13</sup> The activity of human rights defenders has been seriously hampered by the restrictions put in place. International efforts to protect them, such as relocation, are also [affected](#). There is also a risk that the electronic surveillance put in place during the pandemic will be used to track the activity of human rights defenders. In these difficult times when many liberal regimes are focused on their internal crisis, it is therefore important to continue to show [solidarity](#) with human rights defenders all over the world.

## MAIN REFERENCES

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> This chapter is mainly based on information on laureates published on the [Sakharov Prize website](#).
- <sup>2</sup> Judging by their interventions in events and encounters organised by the EP.
- <sup>3</sup> This briefing focuses mainly on developments between early 2019 and early 2020.
- <sup>4</sup> Of these he only received 50 lashes, officially on health-related grounds, but likely due to international protests. In May 2020, Saudi Arabia announced that it was ending flogging as a punishment (see [Saudi Arabia tells courts to end flogging](#), Gulf News, 20 May 2020).
- <sup>5</sup> Ms Bachelet's spokesperson, Rupert Colville urged States to release 'every person detained without sufficient legal basis, including political prisoners, and those detained for critical, dissenting views [...] In countries that are doing very large prisoner releases, (they) have not been necessarily releasing those types of prisoners. And that includes Iran, they have released some, but not others, but Egypt hasn't released hardly anyone yet.' See [UN News](#), 3 April 2020.
- <sup>6</sup> The Embassy cannot grant him asylum, as this would go against [Spanish rules](#) that state that asylum can only be requested on Spanish territory. The party [Podemos](#), which forms part of the Spanish government coalition, has asked the Spanish Prime Minister to expel Leopoldo López from the Spanish Embassy.
- <sup>7</sup> According to her husband's interview with Voice of America: [Detained Iranian Lawyer's Husband Criticizes Iran's Refusal to Furlough Her](#), 22 May 2020.
- <sup>8</sup> While not yet recorded in the Council Treaty database, Sweden's parliament has already ratified it: <https://www.thelocal.se/20191121/swedish-lawmakers-back-controversial-eu-cuba-deal>.
- <sup>9</sup> This section only includes some examples. A comprehensive list of Sakharov nominees from the past facing difficulties would be difficult to compile, as some do not receive the same media attention as laureates.
- <sup>10</sup> This classification is proposed by Anna Lührmann, Marcus Tannenberg and Staffan I. Lindberg, based on V-DEM data. See [Regimes of the World \(RoW\): Opening New Avenues for the Comparative Study of Political Regimes](#), in *Politics and Governance* 2018, Volume 6, Issue 1.
- <sup>11</sup> The press release does not provide more details about the content of these discussions.
- <sup>12</sup> An [EEAS statement](#) speaks of at least seven years in jail, while some [media reports](#) speak of 33 years.
- <sup>13</sup> 'States have recognised that prison conditions enable the quick spread of Covid-19 and have subsequently released large numbers of prisoners, but HRDs remain jailed', according to [Frontline Defenders](#) (April 2020).

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