20 years of the Sakharov Prize: rewarding courage, self-sacrifice

The European Parliament has been awarding the Sakharov Prize to people who have dedicated their lives to defending human rights and mutual understanding for 20 years. Each winner has their own unique story but they all share common ideals, including religious freedom and tolerance, freedom of media, human rights and reconciliation or democracy. Although their struggles were often limited to only one part of the world, they touch all of us.

The winners have shown courage and determination in achieving their goals. However, the cost has been high. They have been jailed, persecuted, lost personal freedom or faced exile and seen their families suffer as those seeking to suppress them targeted the people closest to them. Despite danger and losses they never gave up, because of their strong belief in human rights values and justice.

Human rights are at the core of the European Parliament. Throughout the year, MEPs put the spotlight on human rights violations, visit areas in difficulty and legislate to try and improve human rights. The Sakharov Prize is one of the EP's most visible tools in the human rights field.

This year the Sakharov Prize celebrates its 20th anniversary. In this feature, we group the winners chronologically. Read more about the winners and the things they fought for, below.
1988-1990

Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela

Skin colour is very visible, so visible that in some countries people of different races are discriminated against and have few rights. South Africa's politics of apartheid and racial segregation ended only in the 1990s. Nelson Mandela was the most prominent activist against apartheid and when he became leader of the African National Congress, he represented the resistance of black people to the oppressive regime.

He spent 27 years in prison but was aware that harbouring hatred is not the way forward. Therefore, once he became President of South Africa he strongly promoted the politics of reconciliation between white and black South Africans. Mr Mandela, along with Anatolij Marchenko, won the first Sakharov Prize in 1988.

Anatoli Marchenko

Commitment to the defence of human rights and democracy can be a question of life or death. Soviet dissident Anatoli Marchenko was a Ukrainian origin worker-turned-human rights activist. As a result he spent 20 years in prison and labour camps, whose cruel conditions he later described in his books. One way in which he highlighted human rights problems in the then Soviet Union was through hunger strikes. The one in 1986 proved fateful. In prison, he refused food for three months, while calling for the release of all political prisoners in USSR. He died at the age of 48. He is the only person to be awarded the Sakharov Prize posthumously – in 1988.

Alexander Dubček

The first of two Alexanders to win the Sakharov Prize, Alexander Dubček brought about change when he had power and influence following elevation within the system to First Secretary of the Czechoslovak Communist party. The Slovak politician became the face of reform movement in Czechoslovakia in 1968. His goal was to modify the standard Soviet model of socialism and to create “socialism with human face”. Parliament awarded Dubček the Sakharov Prize just after the Velvet revolution in 1989.

Aung San Suu Kyi

Burmese political party the National League for Democracy won the general election in 1990. Instead of its most prominent member Aung San Suu Kyi becoming prime minister, she was jailed by the ruling military junta to silence her call for democracy. Since then Suu Kyi has spent more than 13 years under house arrest. Imagine: no travelling, no communication with the outside world and separation from her children and estrangement from her husband, who died in England while she was still in Burma. The European Parliament awarded her courage and commitment to the values of democracy and peace in 1990.
1991-1994

Adem Demaçi

Human rights problems aren’t unique to Asia or Africa, they are also found in Europe. Two winners were closely related to Kosovo. Writer and politician Adem Demaçi spent 28 years in prison, jailed for fighting for the fundamental rights of the Albanians in Kosovo. While in prison, he continued to draw attention to the poor situation of the Albanian minority in then communist Yugoslavia. After his release, he went on fighting for his ideals, helping in the reconciliation of ethnic groups in Kosovo and the return of refugees. He received the Sakharov Prize in 1991.

Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo

Imagine that an oppressive dictatorship had kidnapped your son or daughter and you had received no information about them for years. This was the case of 14 Argentinian mothers. In 1977 they gathered together on the Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires and decided to make an appeal to the then Argentinean president - the movement called Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo was formed.

For three decades, these mothers have sought to be reunited with their children. The movement evolved over time into a fight for an independent judicial system, political change, and peace. Every Thursday afternoon the mothers meet at the Plaza de Mayo and circulate for half an hour wearing white scarves as a symbol of peace. The European Parliament awarded their determination and courage in 1992.

Oslobodjenje

Many journalists do not see their work as a job but as a mission. Who will bring the latest news if not us? This was the case for some 70 employees of the Balkan newspaper Oslobodjenje, which was awarded the 1993 Sakharov Prize for its efforts and perseverance in defending Bosnia-Herzegovina as a multi-ethnic state.

The prize was awarded to show appreciation to the brave employees of the newspaper, who risked their own lives to ensure that the newspaper appeared daily, even while under fire. The offices of the newspaper were destroyed and the employees forced to hide in a nuclear shelter in the basement of a building, from where they continued their work.

Taslima Nasreen

“Anyone who does not fight daily for their freedom and their life does not deserve either.” Taslima Nasreen quoted Goethe’s words when she accepted the Sakharov Prize in 1994. She has dedicated her life to stopping the oppression of women and religious fundamentalism in Bangladesh. She has written many articles, attracting ferocious criticism and death threats from religious fundamentalists. After many years under threat, Ms Nasreen asked the European Parliament for help. The EP called on the Bangladeshi government to ensure her safety, through a resolution. She remained in danger, however, and was forced to leave her country in 1999. She now lives in exile in India.
1995-1998

Leyla Zana

Peace and dialogue offer a path to reconciling nations. The first female Kurdish MP, Leyla Zana has applied this motto to relations between the Kurds and Turks. She began by defending the rights of her imprisoned husband, and went on to defend human rights and fought for a peaceful and democratic resolution to the conflicts between the Turkish Government and Kurdish population. In 1994, together with other colleagues, she was condemned to 15 years in prison because she belonged to an illegal organisation - the Party of Kurds workers. Parliament awarded her the Sakharov Prize in 1995 but she was only able to collect it nine years later, after her release.

Wei Jingsheng

Cruel conditions in prison were also day-to-day experiences for the 1996 winner Chinese dissident Wei Jingsheng. Although initially a supporter of the Maoist Cultural Revolution, he later became disillusioned and turned to support of democracy and human rights. In 1978 he put a poster on the “Wall of democracy” in Beijing where he asked for the democratisation of China. After this and other activities he was accused of plotting to overthrow the government and sent to prison for 15 years. He enjoyed freedom for only for two years after his release in 1993 because he continued to criticize the lack of democracy and ended up behind bars again. Due to his deteriorating health and strong international pressure, the Chinese government released him in 1997. He now lives in the US.

Salima Ghezali

Some people find the media is the best way to spread their message. The 1997 winner, Algerian Salima Ghezali, founded her own newspaper in order to promote freedom of media and the rights of women. In her articles, she spoke out against censorship and the bad treatment of journalists in Algeria and also about the need to find a solution to the crisis in Algeria, pointing out the large number of victims among citizens and journalists. Her work brought criticism from Algerian authorities, who closed the paper. Yet, she continues fighting for her goals and for a future democratic Algeria.

Ibrahim Rugova

The peaceful fight was also a motto of the second Kosovar winner. Ibrahim Rugova was a political leader of the Kosovar Albanians and one of 215 signatories against Milošević’s decision to change Kosovo's status. Convinced of the importance of peace, he spearheaded non-violent opposition to the Serbian regime and persisted in supporting Kosovo's independence, whilst strongly opposing the use of force as a means of achieving it. Mr Rugova was proclaimed president of the Republic of Kosovo in the same year he was awarded the Sakharov prize -1998.
1999-2001

Xanana Gusmão

For more than two decades people in East Timor struggled for independence. During Indonesia’s attempt to destabilize the country through violence and force, Xanana Gusmão managed to bring and keep together the opposition in East Timor. Even after he had been imprisoned, he followed his ideals and fought for the peace and solidarity of the people in the region. Parliament gave its recognition to his efforts in 1999. His dream came true in 2002 when East Timor became an independent state. Xanana Gusmão was elected its first president.

¡Basta Ya!

The majority of EU citizens live in peace, but this is not the case for those born in the north of Spain. People living in the Basque region have been victims of terrorist attacks since the 1960s. In defiance of the terrorists ¡Basta Ya! is made up of people and groups who mobilise others against terrorism. The group also offers support to the victims of terrorist attacks. ¡Basta Ya! received the Sakharov prize in 2000.

Nurit Peled-Elhanan

Israeli Nurit Peled-Elhanan lost her 13-year old daughter in a suicide bombing in Jerusalem. However, far from losing hope, Nurit Peled-Elhanan found the inner strength to actively promote dialogue between two communities.

Izzat Ghazzawi

The late Palestinian Izzat Ghazzawi wrote novels about the sufferings caused by the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories. He also lost a child to the conflict and was jailed several times by the Israeli authorities for political activities.

Dom Zacarias Kamwenho

People living in Angola after its declaration of independence in 1970s could have had little idea that the civil war that broke out soon afterwards would last for about 26 years. The results were devastating: one third of the population was displaced, many women suffered rape and the innocence of youth was corrupted through the phenomenon of child soldiers. Several religious leaders and civil society groups sought a peaceful solution. One of them was Archbishop Dom Zacarias Kamwenho. Together with other activists, he participated in peace talks which resulted in ceasefire in 2002. The European Parliament awarded his courage and call for reconciliation in 2001.
2002-2004

Oswaldo Payá

Can you win over a dictatorship using legal means? Oswaldo José Payá Sardiñas would say yes. This Cuban activist hasn’t created an army of rebels to fight Fidel Castro's regime. Instead he keeps pushing to reform the system legally. Throughout the 1990s he twice tried to run as a candidate to the Cuban parliament. Despite the negative response from government, he co-founded the “Varela” project, which aimed to ensure freedom of expression, free pluralist elections and the release of all political prisoners. Some 25,000 Cubans signed up to these demands. Despite the support, Havana not only ignored the call for a referendum but in March 2003 sentenced two thirds of the activists (75 people) to long term imprisonment. He received the prize in 2002.

Kofi Annan and UN

The United Nations was founded on the belief that the recognition of dignity and equal rights for all the people will bring freedom, justice and peace in the world. The UN has been pursuing this goal for more than 60 years. Often, it is a struggle that costs lives. This was the case of UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Sergio Vieira de Mello who was killed in Iraq in 2003 while he was there as UN Secretary General Kofi Annan’s special representative.

When the EP awarded the Sakharov Prize to Kofi Annan and all the staff of the UN in 2003, it was seen as recognition of their efforts to achieve peace and honoured all UN officials who have lost their lives in this fight.

Belarusian Association of Journalists

The fight for a free media in Europe is not over yet. Censorship, harassment, expatriation and criminal prosecution are common practice for journalists in Belarus. Fortunately, they are not alone. The Belarusian Association of Journalists is known for its commitment and struggle for the freedom of speech and freedom of information on human rights. Their goals include building up and promoting independent and professional journalism in Belarus. The association was awarded the prize in 2004.
2005

Ladies in White

White is also symbolic for the Cuban "Ladies in White" movement. This group of mothers and daughters hold peaceful protests against the imprisonment of their husbands and sons, imprisoned for criticising the lack of political freedom in the country.

They became active in 2003 after the imprisonment of some 80 dissidents. First they concentrated on writing letters to the government. Then they decided to take to the streets. You can see them every Sunday at religious services in Havana, after which they walk outside calling for the liberation of their men. Dressed in white as a symbol of purity and innocence, "Ladies in White" are committed to respecting human rights, while also criticising the lack of freedom in politics within the country. The Ladies in White received the Sakharov Prize in 2005.

Reporters without borders

The work of a journalist can be pretty dangerous, especially, if you operate in a non-democratic country or a war zone. One of the best known promoters of free media is the Paris based NGO Reporters without Borders. Their campaigns aim at raising awareness of the importance of press freedom and on the journalists who are victims of prosecution, imprisonment or censorship. Throughout a wide network of national and regional branches, the organisation is active on five continents.

In its fight against censorship, it also publishes articles which have been banned in their country of origin and offers practical support from grants to the family of imprisoned journalists to "press" flack jackets for those working in war zones. The organisation received the Sakharov Prize in 2005.

Hauwa Ibrahim

Amputation of a hand as a punishment for theft? Stoning to death for adultery? Such practices seem to belong to the Middle Ages. Well, not in Northern Nigeria where an extreme form of Islamic Sharia law is still applied. Hauwa Ibrahim is one of the few women lawyers fighting for human rights and against religious fundamentalism in the country. Through her work, she has defended several cases involving the death penalty or cruel punishment. She is also a keen supporter of education, which she sees a way of empowering women and the best defence for those facing the greatest deprivation. Hauwa Ibrahim received the Sakharov Prize in 2005.
2006-2008

Aliaksandr Milinkevich

Over the years, Belarus has been called the last dictatorship in Europe. The Sakharov prize winner in 2006, Aliaksandr Milinkevich has dedicated his life to turn his country into a democratic state with full respect for human rights. By becoming an official presidential candidate of the United Democratic Opposition in Belarus, Mr Milinkevich represented an alternative to the regime imposed by Aliaksandr Lukashenko. However, Mr Lukashenko won the elections in 2006. Although the EU said that the results were subject to fraud, Milinkevich managed to get the support from more than 6% of the population. Since then he has been repeatedly arrested and detained under various pretexts.

Salih Mahmoud Osman

Sudan has become synonymous with instability and suffering. Despite the constant danger, there are brave people who help the victims of the civil wars. One of them is Salih Mahmoud Osman. He provided legal and medical aid to those whose human rights were violated. He paid a high price. He was imprisoned by the Sudanese government for over seven months and members of his own family have been killed or thrown out of their homes by the militias. Nevertheless, he continued in his fight for justice and at present he is a Member of the Sudanese National Parliament. Mr Osman received the Sakharov Prize in 2007

Hu Jia

This year's Sakharov Prize goes to Hu Jia, a prominent human rights activist and dissident in the People's Republic of China. He has embraced a wide range of causes, including environmental issues, HIV/AIDS advocacy and a call for an official enquiry into the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre. He also acted as a co-ordinator of the "barefoot lawyers movement". Having already been arrested several times, he spoke to MEPs in November 2007 under house arrest via a conference call during a public meeting of the EP Human Rights Subcommittee on human rights in China in the run-up to the Olympic Games. As a result he was charged by the authorities with "inciting subversion of state power" and sentenced on 3 April 2008 to three-and-a-half years in jail.