



Sakharov Prize 2009 awarded to Memorial

The European Parliament's 2009 Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought has been awarded to Russian civil rights defence organization Memorial, and their three representatives Oleg Orlov, Sergei Kovalev and Lyudmila Alexeyeva, as well as all other human rights defenders in Russia. Each year the EP's Sakharov prize is awarded to individuals or international organisations who – like Sakharov – have distinguished themselves in the struggle for human rights.

This year we commemorate the 20th anniversary of Andrei Sakharov's death, the man behind the EP's human right prize. On this occasion you were able to chat on various issues with one of this year's winners, Oleg Orlov from Memorial on the EP's Facebook page on 14 December. This year's prize, consisting of a certificate and a cheque for €50,000, was awarded by EP President Jerzy Buzek in Strasbourg on 16 December.

In this feature we have grouped all articles relating to the award of this year's prize.

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The European Parliament's 2009 Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought has been awarded to Russian civil rights defence organization Memorial, and their three representatives Oleg Orlov, Sergei Kovalev and Lyudmila Alexeyeva, as well as all other human rights defenders in Russia. The winner was announced by EP President Jerzy Buzek in Strasbourg on 22 October. The prize ceremony will take place in Strasbourg on 16 December.

Awarding the prize Mr Buzek said: "By awarding this year's prize to Oleg Orlov, Sergei Kovalev and Lyudmila Alexeyeva on behalf of Memorial and all other human rights defenders in Russia, we hope to contribute to ending the circle of fear and violence surrounding human rights defenders in the Russian Federation, and to advance our message that civil society activists everywhere must be free to exercise their most basic rights of freedom of thought and freedom of expression."

He went on to say that "we need to be free to follow our thoughts because this is essential in getting at the truth. Let me share with you my personal satisfaction that I can announce today this prize as the President of the European Parliament. In particular for a man who comes from Solidarity and who saw Poland fighting for truth and finally won freedom in the 1980s".

The organisation's three representatives are:

Oleg Orlov, the current chair of Memorial. On 6 October 2009 Oleg Orlov was fined and ordered to retract public statements following a defamation lawsuit brought against him by the President of the Republic of Chechnya, Ramzan Kadyrov. Orlov had accused Kadyrov of being behind the murder of Chechen rights activist Natalya Estemirova. On 23 November 2007 Orlov himself was abducted in Ingushetia, together with three journalists, before being beaten, threatened with execution and released.

Sergei Kovalev, who founded the first Soviet human rights association in 1969, the Initiative Group for the Defence of Human Rights in the USSR, and became one of the initiators of Memorial. Kovalev has been an outspoken critic of authoritarian tendencies in the administrations of Boris Yeltsin and Vladimir Putin. In 1996 he resigned in protest as head of Yeltsin's presidential human rights commission. In 2002 he organized a public commission to investigate the 1999 Moscow apartment bombings, which was effectively paralyzed after the persecution and assassination of its members.

Lyudmila Mikhailovna Alexeyeva, who, together with Andrei Sakharov and others, founded the Moscow Helsinki Group to monitor Soviet compliance with the Helsinki Final Act in 1976. Since the 1960s Alexeyeva had been campaigning for fair trials of arrested dissidents and objective coverage in the media. She was excluded from the Communist Party and deprived of her job as editor of a scientific magazine. Alexeyeva co-chaired, with Garry Kasparov and Georgy Satarov, the All-Russian Civic Congress which Alexeyeva and Satarov left due to disagreement with Kasparov in January 2008. She has been critical of the Kremlin's human rights record and has accused the government of encouraging extremists with its nationalistic policies, such as the mass deportations of Georgians in 2006 and police raids against foreigners working in street markets, as well as Russian conduct in Ingushetia.

The Sakharov Prize

The Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought, named in honour of the Soviet physicist and political dissident Andrei Sakharov, has been awarded by the European Parliament every year since 1988 to individuals or organisations who have made an important contribution to the fight for human rights or democracy. This year's award coincides with the 20th anniversary of Andrei Sakharov's death.

Next steps

On 14 December 2009 the Foreign Affairs and Development Committees and Human Rights Subcommittee will hold a joint meeting with the winner (or in absentia, with his/her representative). This year's prize, consisting of a certificate and a cheque for €50,000, will be awarded in Strasbourg Wednesday 16 December.

The Finalists

Palestinian gynaecologist Izzeldin Abuelaish, Swedish-Eritrean journalist and political prisoner Dawit Isaak and Lyudmila Alexeyeva, Oleg Orlov and Sergei Kovalev on behalf of Memorial and all other human rights defenders in Russia are the three finalists for this year's Sakharov Prize for freedom of thought, the European Parliament's award for human rights and democracy campaigners. The winner will be chosen 22 October.

The three were chosen on Tuesday evening at a joint meeting of the Foreign Affairs and Development Committees from a list of 10 candidates put forward by MEPs. Read more about them below (they are in alphabetical order):

Dr Izzeldin Abuelaish – A Palestinian obstetrician in Gaza who treats Israelis and Palestinians. In January 2009, during an Israeli raid on Gaza, a shell hit his apartment killing his three daughters. In memory of his daughters, Dr Abuelaish plans to set up an international foundation to help improve education for women and girls in Gaza and throughout the world. In spite of this personal family tragedy, Doctor Izzeldin Abuelaish continues to fight for peace between the Israeli and Palestinian peoples and to build bridges between the two war-torn, violence-ridden communities.

Dawit Isaak – This Swedish journalist, writer and playwright of Eritrean origin has been a political prisoner since 2001. Dawit Isaak, along with nine other leading journalists from the free press and 15 politicians demanding democratic reforms and a thorough, objective evaluation of the events leading to Eritrea's war with Ethiopia, were arrested as traitors. The journalists have also been accused of receiving financial aid from abroad – a crime according to Eritrean press laws. In a parliamentary resolution in January, the European Parliament expressed its "deep concern at the continuing imprisonment of Dawit Isaak, who has been in jail since his arrest in September 2001, without having been tried by a court of law" and demanded his immediate release.

MEMORIAL (Oleg Orlov, Sergei Kovalev and Lyudmila Alexeyeva on behalf of MEMORIAL and all other human rights defenders in Russia). The Memorial organisation, whose first leader was Andrei Sakharov, seeks to promote fundamental rights in post-Soviet states including Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia, Tajikistan, Moldova and Ukraine.

It was originally founded in the late 1980s to create a memorial complex to victims of Stalinist repression. It later expanded into a civil rights defence organisation. The nomination says, "Memorial promotes the truth about the political repression of the Soviet Union and fights against current human rights abuses in post-Soviet states to ensure their democratic future."

Winner to be chosen in October

Parliament's political group leaders will select the winner on 22 October and the prize will be awarded to the laureate in Strasbourg on 16 December. The winner will also receive €50,000.

The Sakharov Prize

Since 1988, in the spirit of renowned physicist and Nobel Peace Prize winner Andrei Sakharov, the European Parliament has awarded the annual Sakharov Prize for freedom of thought to individuals or organisations who work for human rights and fundamental freedoms and against oppression and injustice. This year's award coincides with the 20th anniversary of Andrei Sakharov's death.

Andrei Sakharov

By the time of his death in the Moscow winter 20 years ago, Andrei Sakharov had built an international reputation as a nuclear physicist, human rights activist and Nobel Peace Prize winner. His fears over the implications of his work led him to call for peaceful coexistence and later for human rights in the USSR. This led the European Parliament to found a human rights prize in his honour. In his 1968 essay on peace he wrote that "intellectual freedom is essential to human society".

Andrei Sakharov: A life in dates

1921: Born in Moscow on 21 May, his father was a physics teacher.

1942-47: Graduates with distinction in physics, awarded a PhD

1948: Included in a group of prominent Soviet scientists whose job was to develop the atomic then hydrogen bomb.

Late 1950's: Sakharov becomes concerned about the moral implications of his work. Steadily becomes an advocate against international nuclear proliferation and supports the 1963 partial test ban treaty.

1967-68: The turning point in Sakharov's life. In 1967 he writes to the Soviet leadership to urge them to accept US proposals for a rejection of anti-missile defence as he believes it will lead to an arms race and a greater risk of war. His pleas are ignored and the following year he puts these fears in an essay "Reflections on Progress, Peaceful Coexistence and Intellectual Freedom" in which he wrote: "Freedom of thought is the only guarantee of the feasibility of a scientific democratic approach to politics, economics and culture".

The essay's underground distribution and publication abroad turn him into a dissident: "I was removed from top secret work and 'relieved' of my privileges in the Soviet 'Nomenclatura,'" Sakharov recalled later.

1970: Helps found the Moscow Human Rights Committee.

1975: Awarded the Nobel Peace Prize - his wife Elena Bonner makes the acceptance speech.

1979-80: Criticism of Soviet invasion of Afghanistan earns him and his wife internal exile in the closed city of Nizhny Novgorod until 1985.

1986: Released from house exile by Mikhail Gorbachev under Glasnost and Perestroika.

1988: European Parliament founds a human rights prize in his honour.

1989: March: elected to the new Soviet Parliament, the All-Union Congress of People's Deputies.

December 1989: Dies of a heart attack in his apartment.

Building on the Sakharov Legacy - the EP and human rights

In Europe and the wider world, the European Parliament advocates respect for basic human rights, freedom and democracy. Parliament's Committee on Foreign Affairs, with its Subcommittee on Human Rights, directly addresses the issue of the defence of human rights outside the Union.

Each year the EP's Sakharov prize is awarded to individuals or international organisations who – like Sakharov – have distinguished themselves in the struggle for human rights.

Don't miss the official presentation by MEPs and political groups of this year's 10 candidates at a joint meeting of the Foreign Affairs and Development Committees and the Subcommittee on Human Rights on Wednesday morning.

Parliament and human rights

- The EP publishes an annual report on human rights around the world and fundamental rights within the EU
- At each monthly sitting, human rights abuses are debated on Thursday afternoon
- Members monitor international elections

The 10 nominees for 2009

The ten nominations for this year's Sakharov Prize, the EP's prize for defenders of human rights and democracy, have now been put forward and will be officially presented at the end of the month at a joint meeting of the Foreign Affairs Committee, the Development Committee and the Human Rights Subcommittee. The winner will be chosen on 22 October and the prize will be ceremonially awarded mid-December.

Candidates for the prize must be supported by a political group or at least 40 individual MEPs. This year's candidates, in alphabetical order are:

Dr Izzeldin Abuelaish: A Palestinian obstetrician in Gaza who has treated both Israelis and Palestinians. In January 2009 during an Israeli raid on Gaza a shell entered his apartment killing his 3 daughters. Dr Abuelaish campaigns for peace between Israel and the Palestinians. He has been nominated by Véronique de Keyser, Hans-Gert Pöttering, Caroline Lucas and 52 other MEPs.

Foundation Vicente Ferrer: A Foundation that aims to protect and promote the rights of minorities in India and to support the eradication of extreme poverty. It has been nominated by Andrés Perelló and 39 other MEPs.

Mr Dawit Isaak: Eritrean journalist, writer and playwright, political prisoner since 2001. He has been nominated by Eva-Britt Svensson on behalf of the European United Left/Nordic Green Left Group (GUE/NGL) as well as Olle Schmidt and 31 others.

Mariam Lamizana: Minister for Social Action and Social Solidarity in Burkina Faso. She has been active in the fight against female genital mutilation. She has been nominated by Francesco Speroni on behalf of Europe of Freedom and Democracy Group (EFD).

Lyudmila Alexeyeva, Oleg Orlov and Sergei Kovalev on behalf of MEMORIAL and all other human rights defenders in Russia: This organisation promotes fundamental rights in post-Soviet states. They have been nominated by Rebecca Harms and Daniel Cohn-Bendit on behalf of Group of the Greens/European Free Alliance.

MEMORIAL: An organisation promoting fundamental rights in post-Soviet states. This group has been nominated by Jacek Saryusz-Wolski and 59 others.

Dr Denis Mukwege: A Doctor and founder of Panzi Hospital in Bukavu in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Dr Mukwege specialises in helping women and girls who have been victims of rape and brutal sexual abuse. He is nominated by Guy Verhofstadt on behalf of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe Group (ALDE).

Father Thaddeus, Nguyen van Ly: A Vietnamese Roman Catholic priest and prominent dissident involved in pro-democracy movements, for which he was imprisoned for almost 15 years. He is nominated by Michael Gahler and 44 others.

Shadi SADR on behalf of Neda and Iranian citizens striving for the respect of human rights: An Iranian human rights attorney, feminist, activist and journalist. Shadi Sadr focuses in particular on ending the death penalty and stoning as well as on women's rights and equality. She is nominated by Marietje Schaake and Barbara Lochbihler and 38 other MEPs.

Roberto Saviano: An Italian journalist and writer, threatened by the Italian mafia in Naples as a consequence of his uncompromised attack on organised crime. Mr Saviano has been nominated by Sonia Alfano and 39 others.

Sakharov: dates to look out for

16 Sept – deadline for nominations of candidates.

30 Sept – presentation of applications at a joint meeting of Foreign Affairs, Development and Human Rights Committees.

6 Oct – vote on three finalists by the Foreign Affairs and Development Committees.

22 Oct – decision of the leaders of the main political groups on the winner.

14 Dec – joint meeting of Foreign Affairs, Development and Human Rights Committees with the winner.

16 Dec – Award ceremony

What is the Sakharov prize?

Since 1988, in the spirit of the renowned physicist and Nobel Peace Prize winner Andrei Sakharov, the European Parliament has awarded the annual Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought in order to honour individuals or organisations for their efforts on behalf of human rights and fundamental freedoms and against oppression and injustice. The award of the 2008 Sakharov prize for human rights went to jailed Chinese dissident Hu Jia.

The European Parliament awards the human rights prize, endowed with Euro 50 000, at a sitting in Strasbourg which falls on or around 10 December, the day on which the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights was signed in 1948.

We will keep you up to date on who will win this year's prize. In our next article we will present Andrei Sakharov's fight for human rights as well as the EP's activities in the field.

Oleg Orlov of Memorial: "The major menace to us comes from the state"

With Moscow temperatures dipping to -20C, we met the head of the Memorial human rights organisation, Oleg Orlov, who told us about the frozen atmosphere of the Kremlin towards human rights. He spoke of the harassment and threats he and his colleagues face from the Russian state. He also warned of the rehabilitation of the "Stalin myth" and said President Dmitry Medvedev is "a dreamer". On Wednesday 16 December Memorial will be awarded Parliament's 2009 Sakharov human rights prize.

How will this award change the work of "Memorial"?

It will give additional strength to me and our staff. It is important to get positive external appreciation, because sometimes you feel that you are scooping the sea with a spoon. It is especially felt by our colleagues in the Northern Caucasus.

Previously we thought that this type of publicity and awards would give us additional protection. It was an error, they don't.

What are the major problems that defenders of human rights in Russia and those defended by them face?

The major problem is that the menace to us comes from the representatives of the state. Of course, additional threats come from neo-fascists. Many of my colleagues have been attacked or killed by neo-fascists.

Governmental threats come in various forms, starting with never ending checks, where we are obliged to deliver volumes and volumes of reports which prevent us from doing our work. This can lead to the closure of an organisation or a criminal case accusing us of extremism, in order to get rid of critical voices.

Even more dangerous are the cases of illegal action and violence against us. They include phone threats to the families of human rights defenders, setting fire to the offices of human rights organisations or even acts of direct violence. In 2007 I was abducted, threatened with being shot, beaten and left half-naked in the snow.

Our close and dear friend, a brilliant protector of human rights Natasha Estemirova, whom we called the "Heart of Memorial" was killed.

The threats to those we protect are obvious. There is the threat that they will get no justice in court, that no criminal case will be initiated or that the guilty will be not found. The second threat is that of the illegal violence from the same people threatening us.

There are racists, neo-fascists who attack immigrants, corrupt militia - police - not respecting laws, representatives of power structures like the FSB (Federal Security Service) menacing those who had the guts to file a complaint in the Strasbourg Court (European Court of Human Rights). Threats to us and people we are trying to protect come from these same forces.

What changes did the advent of President Medvedev bring?

A lot was said. Unlike the previous president, Medvedev says democratic, liberal and intelligent things. This gave hope to a part of liberal Russian society and some people in Europe. Alas, those words have not been followed by action.

There's a dreamer in Kremlin dreaming about the future of Russia, while the country is moving to a completely different destiny. We would like to see neither dreams nor articles, but concrete decrees and draft laws.

Has Russia accepted past crimes committed against its own and foreign citizens? Is the cult of Stalin still alive?

Russia is in the midst of a continuing struggle. In the 80's and 90's it seemed that we were facing the truth and drawing a line underneath it. But then "a crawling rehabilitation" of Stalin followed. We have to continue our work in this field, because a big part of our society does not wish to know the truth or does not know it. Stalin is becoming a hero to not only to those with communist views, but also to some young people.

The rehabilitation of the "Stalin myth" takes many forms: Not only communist, but also on the basis of a post-empire syndrome. A great empire has collapsed: regions that many Russians considered to be their own walked away. According to the version suggested to them by propaganda, Russia was humiliated.

Hence an image of a leader under whom the empire was great. "The great emperor Stalin" is the foundation on which the reanimation of the myth is based. We have to show the real face of this empire and the price that its citizens paid for its "greatness".

What errors were made in Chechnya and how can the Caucasian knot be untangled?

Numerous and constant errors were made. The major one was that the Kremlin had no strategy, only tactics. They were always solving concrete tactical tasks, often with success, losing out on the strategy.

The major problem of those taking decisions on all Northern Caucasus was disregard of the most important aspect - human rights. Breaches of human rights are destabilising the situation in the North Caucasus, extending the conflict, reducing possibilities to solve it and supporting the basis for a terroristic underground.

One more mistake was the unwillingness during the first phase to negotiate with the separatists, who had normal political objectives, when it might have been possible to rationally discussed problems with them.

Now we have a completely terrorist underground movement, radical Islamic groups you have nothing to negotiate with, plus the biggest mass of the people in resistance motivated by the sense of revenge for killed relatives, humiliation and torture.

Ramzan Kadyrov, (the leader the Kremlin supports in Chechnya) is an absolute ruler of who does not want to observe the laws of the Russian Federation. It's an impasse. All suggestions made by human rights organisations get negative answers from the Kremlin.

« In 2007 I was abducted, threatened with being shot, beaten and left half-naked in the snow »

Oleg Orlov

Russia's Memorial accept Sakharov human rights prize

Sergei Kovalev, former political prisoner turned activist for Russian human rights group Memorial gave an emotional and heartfelt address to the European Parliament on Wednesday 16 December. He was there with Oleg Orlov and Lyudmila Alexeyeva to collect Parliament's prestigious annual Sakharov human rights prize. Mr Kovalev spoke of his murdered colleagues and the need for Europe to apply support and pressure in its dealing with Moscow.

The prize was awarded by Parliament's President Jerzy Buzek who drew on his own experience in Communist Poland to talk about the significance of human rights. He also said he was "particularly proud" to chair the Parliament and thus be able to award this prize which had been voted for a majority of Members.

Mr Buzek also spoke of murdered activists **Natalia Estemirova** and **Anna Politkovskaya** whom he said "should be here today: their killers have to be brought to justice".

By an ironic coincidence not lost on those in the Chamber, Russian Memorial was founded by Andrei Sakharov to document Soviet crimes.

"Murdered in Moscow, shot in St Petersburg"

Accepting the prize, Sergei Kovalev spoke on behalf of the group. "I am sure that, in awarding the Sakharov Prize to Memorial, the European Parliament had them in mind, first and foremost – our dead friends, comrades-in-arms, kindred spirits. This prize belongs by right to them. And the first name I should cite is that of Natalya Estemirova, human rights defender and fellow member of Memorial, murdered this summer in Chechnya."

Mr Kovalev said, "I cannot go on without mentioning other names too: the lawyer Stanislav Markelov and journalists Anna Politkovskaya and Anastasia Baburova, murdered in Moscow, ethnologist Nikolai Girenko shot in St Petersburg, Farid Babayev, murdered in Dagestan, and many others – sadly, it is a list that could go on for a long time."

Mr Kovalev then invited Members to **stand for a moment** to honour those who had died.

Tribute to Andrei Sakharov "a distinguished thinker"

Mr Kovalev said "Andrei Sakharov, who died 20 years ago, was not just a distinguished champion of human rights in the Soviet Union. He was also a distinguished thinker".

"The European Community, whose Parliament instituted this prize is, perhaps, today the model closest to that future united humanity dreamt of by Andrei Dmitrievich Sakharov".

On Russia: "Today my country needs support and pressure"

"The situation in our country is not as straightforward as it might appear to the superficial observer. We have many allies in society – both in our struggle for human rights and in our struggle with Stalinism. Moreover, Russian authority is also not as homogeneous as it might seem at first sight," he said.

"What can we expect here from European politicians and from European public opinion?" he asked. "Andrei Sakharov formulated these expectations more than 20 years ago: "Today my country needs support and pressure"

He elaborated, saying "so what should Europe do in relation to Russia? It should act towards Russia just as it does towards any other European country that has taken on certain obligations and has a responsibility to meet them. It is Europe's duty not to remain silent but, again and again, to repeat and remind, and insist respectfully and firmly that Russia meets its obligations," he said.

"The basis of all other freedoms"

Mr Kovalev finished by saying, "freedom of thought is the basis of all other freedoms. That is why it is so appropriate for the Sakharov Prize to be called 'For Freedom of Thought'. We are proud to receive it today."

Memorial's Sergei Kovalev addresses the Parliament after accepting the Sakharov Prize. Strasbourg, 16 December 2009

Ladies and Gentlemen,

On behalf of the Memorial organisation, I would like to thank the European Parliament for its high accolade – the Sakharov Prize.

We at Memorial see this award as relating not only to our organisation. We take the view that, through us, the prize is being bestowed on the whole human rights community in Russia, and indeed more widely – on the entire section of Russian civil society sympathetic towards defenders of human rights. For forty years now – first in the Soviet Union and then in Russia – human rights defenders have been standing up for 'European', that is to say, universal values. This struggle has never been easy; in recent years it has become tragic, as it increasingly claims the lives of the best, the most active and the most fearless.

I am sure that, in awarding the Sakharov Prize to the Memorial organisation, the European Parliament had them in mind, first and foremost – our dead friends, comrades-in-arms, kindred spirits. This prize belongs by right to them. And the first name I should cite is that of Natalya Estemirova, human rights defender and fellow member of Memorial, murdered this summer in Chechnya.

I cannot go on without mentioning other names too: the lawyer Stanislav Markelov and journalists Anna Politkovskaya and Anastasia Baburova, murdered in Moscow, ethnologist Nikolai Girenko shot in St Petersburg, Farid Babayev, murdered in Dagestan, and many others – sadly, it is a list that could go on for a long time. I ask you to honour the memory of these people by standing.

/a minute's silence/
Thank you.

These people died so that Russia should become a genuinely European country, where public and political life is based on the priority of the life and freedom of each single individual. That means they also died for Europe, since a Europe without Russia is incomplete.

I hope that all those present understand that, in speaking of 'European values' and 'European political culture', I certainly do not ascribe to such terms any geographical or even civilisational content or any 'Eurocentrism'. I am convinced that political culture based on freedom and the rights of the individual embodies a universal system of values that is equally fitting for Europe and for Africa, for Russia and for China.

Everything at today's event is symbolic and interconnected: the award itself, the day on which it is presented, those making the award and those receiving it.

Andrei Sakharov, who died exactly twenty years ago, was not just a distinguished champion of human rights in the Soviet Union. He was also a distinguished thinker, advancing and defending two fundamentally important propositions. The first proposition was that only by overcoming political disunity and enmity does humanity get the chance to survive and develop and the opportunity to cope with the global challenges of the age and secure world peace and progress on our planet. The second proposition was that the only reliable support for our efforts to overcome the political disunity of the modern world is human rights, and, first and foremost, intellectual freedom.

The European Community, whose Parliament instituted this prize while Sakharov was still alive, is, perhaps, today the model closest to that future united humanity dreamt of by Andrei Dmitrievich Sakharov.

In recent times Russia and Europe have been increasingly set in opposition to one other. At home in Russia it has become fashionable to talk about 'Russia's special path', about 'Russia's special spirituality' and about 'special national traditions and national values'. And in the Euro-Atlantic world one often hears opinions of Russia as an 'odd man out' among

countries, one whose deformed political development is determined by its history, national psychology and the specific characteristics of its civilisation, and similar speculative constructs. What is there to say in this regard? Of course, Russia, indeed like any other country, has its own path towards ordering life on the basis of universal human foundations.

No nation in the world organises its life according to recipes and designs entirely borrowed from outside. But Russia's connection with Europe is far from being determined only by who borrows from whom. The question can be put another way: has Russia brought something to the pan-European and universal civilisation taking shape before our eyes? And here I would like to recall Russia's unique contribution to the spiritual, social and political progress of Europe and humanity: the key role played by the Russian, or to be more accurate, the Soviet human rights movement in forming modern political culture. Andrei Sakharov rethought the role of human rights and intellectual freedom in the modern world as far back as 1968. His ideas were transferred to the practical level by the human rights organisations created by Soviet dissidents – first and foremost, the Moscow Helsinki Group, represented here today by Lyudmila Alexeyeva.

In the mid-1970s these organisations were the first to declare publicly that fine-sounding declarations about international defence of human rights could not just remain declarations. Soviet dissidents succeeded in mobilising world public opinion and, as a result, the Western political elite was forced to move away from its traditional pragmatism and instead to formulate a new vision of the goals and tasks of international politics.

Naturally, this development also gave rise to a multitude of new problems that are still not fully resolved – an example being the doctrine of humanitarian intervention and the need to safeguard this doctrine in legal and institutional terms. Nevertheless, over the last thirty years a considerable amount has been achieved, although much more still lies ahead to be done. I simply wanted to recall that Russian human rights defenders of the 1970s were at the origins of this process and, if only for that reason, Russia cannot be struck from the list of European countries. To do this is not in the power of either the present-day Russian political elite or those European politicians who consider Russia an 'odd man out among countries'.

Why, specifically in Russia in the last third of the 20th century, as nowhere else, has the human rights movement become synonymous with citizenship and has Russian human rights thinking been able to develop as far as Sakharov's global generalisations and take on the quality of a new political philosophy? For me, the answer to this question is evident: it is linked to the unique nature of Russia's tragic history in the 20th century, to the need to comprehend and overcome the bloody and dirty past. If the Second World War was the impetus for the post-war political modernisation of Western Europe, having become the logical conclusion of the relatively short period of domination by the Nazi regime in Germany, then for the USSR and Russia the need for reconstruction was dictated by the experience of seventy years of domination by the Communist regime, the culmination of which was Stalin's terrorist dictatorship. In the second half of the 1960s two key components of resurgent Russian citizenship were legal consciousness and historical memory.

The human rights movement that arose in the USSR during those years positioned itself, from the outset, first and foremost as a movement for overcoming Stalinism in the public, political and cultural life of the country. In one of this movement's first public texts – a leaflet distributed by the organisers of the historic meeting on 5 December 1965 in defence of the law – it was said in this regard, with the utmost simplicity and brevity: 'In the past the unlawful acts of the authorities cost the life and freedom of millions of Soviet citizens. The bloody past calls us to vigilance in the present'.

In essence, this special connection between two components of civil consciousness – legal thinking and historical memory – is inherited in its entirety by Russia's modern human rights community, and perhaps also by Russian civil society as a whole.

It seems to me that the paramount importance that Sakharov attached to Memorial in the last years and months of his life is linked to the fact that he understood clearly this specific aspect. In the activity of Memorial, these two basic components of Russian citizenship have merged into one whole.

It is my view that now also, on the twentieth anniversary of Sakharov's death, the Members of the European Parliament, in choosing the recipient of the Prize, also felt and understood this specific aspect. We all remember the Resolution 'On European conscience and totalitarianism' adopted by the European Parliament in April. This Resolution, like the OSCE Resolution that followed in July 'On divided Europe reunited', demonstrates that a united Europe understands the sense and thrust of our work. And I take the opportunity, on behalf of Memorial, to thank you for this understanding.

The absurdity of the present-day political situation in Russia is illustrated clearly by the fact that our own Parliament – the Parliament of the country that suffered most and longest of all from Stalinism and Communist dictatorship – instead of warmly supporting these Resolutions, immediately declared them 'anti-Russian'!

All of this shows that, even today, Stalinism is not, for Russia, simply a historical episode of the 20th century. We let slip a few years of confused and incomplete political freedom.

The main feature of Communist totalitarianism – the attitude to people as an expendable resource – was not eliminated.

The aims of State policy are determined, as before, regardless of the opinion and interests of the country's citizens.

The establishment of a regime of 'imitation democracy' in today's Russia is connected precisely with this. All of the institutions of modern democracy are resolutely imitated: a constitutional order, a multi-party system, parliamentary elections, separation of powers, an independent judicial system, independent television broadcasting, and so on. But such imitation, going by the name of socialist democracy, also existed under Stalin.

It is just that today mass terror is not needed for imitation: there are enough stereotypes of public consciousness and behaviour preserved from the Stalinist era.

On the other hand, terror is also used when necessary. Over the last ten years more than three thousand people in the Chechen Republic have 'disappeared' – that is to say, been abducted, tortured, summarily executed and buried no-one knows where. At first these crimes were perpetrated by representatives of the federal authorities, but they then handed this 'work' over to local security structures.

How many Russian security officials are punished for these crimes? A mere handful. Who ensured they were called to account and judged? First and foremost, the human rights defender Natalya Estemirova, the journalist Anna Politkovskaya, the lawyer Stanislav Markelov. Where are they all? Murdered.

We see that the violence routinely taking place in Chechnya is extending beyond its borders and threatening to spread to the whole country.

Yet we see that, even in such circumstances, people are found who are prepared to oppose a return to the past. And this is a basis for hope. Ultimately, we all understand that nobody can return Russia to the path of freedom and democracy but Russia itself, its people, its constitutional institutions, its civil society.

What is more, the situation in our country is not as straightforward as it might appear to the superficial observer. We have many allies in society – both in our struggle for human rights and in our struggle with Stalinism. Moreover, Russian authority is also not as homogeneous as it might seem at first sight.

What can we expect here from European politicians and from European public opinion? Andrei Dmitrievich Sakharov formulated these expectations more than twenty years ago: 'Today my country needs support and pressure'.

A united Europe has opportunities for such a firm and, at the same time, friendly policy based on support and pressure but is far from making full use of them. I would like to mention just two examples, familiar to Memorial in its day-to-day activity.

The first is the work of the European Court of Human Rights with respect to complaints by Russian citizens. This institution could become an effective support for the Russian judicial system. It is not just the fact that the very possibility that victims may appeal to Strasbourg must compel Russian courts to work in a more qualitative and independent way. The main thing is that enforcement of the judgments of the European Court should remove the very causes leading to violation of human rights.

In recent years more than a hundred judgments have been delivered in Strasbourg in 'Chechen' cases, concerning serious crimes by representatives of the State against citizens. Yet what happens? Nothing. Russia duly pays the victims the compensation ordered by the European Court, as some sort of 'impunity tax', refusing to investigate the crimes and punish those guilty. Moreover, not only are all the generals mentioned by name in the Strasbourg judgments not brought before the courts but they are put forward for promotion.

So what if the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe is called upon to monitor enforcement of the Court's judgments? In Strasbourg they gesture helplessly – 'What can we do?' – and remain silent.

The second, more general, example concerns relations between Russia and the European Union in the area of human rights. Today they virtually boil down to the fact that the European Union holds consultations with Russia on this subject once every six months. How is this opportunity used? Officials, not of the highest rank, talk for a few hours behind closed doors – Europe asks about Chechnya, Russia answers with a question about Estonia or Latvia, and they go their separate ways for another six months. Both Russian and international non-governmental organisations organise fringe events and hearings and present reports. In meetings with human rights defenders, the representatives of Brussels sigh sadly 'What can we do?' – and remain silent.

So what should Europe do in relation to Russia? From our point of view, the answer is simple: it should act towards Russia just as it does towards any other European country that has taken on certain obligations and has a responsibility to meet them. Alas, today, Europe increasingly rarely formulates its recommendations to Russia in the area of democracy and human rights, sometimes even preferring not to mention them at all. It is not important why this is the case – whether it is a sense of the futility of efforts or pragmatic considerations linked to oil and gas.

It is Europe's duty not to remain silent but, again and again, to repeat and remind, and insist respectfully and firmly that Russia meet its obligations. Of course, not only are there no guarantees, but there are also no particular hopes that these calls will achieve their objectives. However, failure to remind will certainly be understood by the Russian authorities as indulgence. Taking sensitive issues off the agenda unequivocally harms Russia. But it also harms Europe just as much, since it places in doubt the commitment of the European institutions to European values.

The prize you are awarding today is called 'For Freedom of Thought'.

One would think, how can thought not be free, who can limit its freedom and how? There is a means – it is the fear that becomes part of a person's personality and makes that person think and even feel as required. People are not only afraid, they find an outlet in 'loving Big Brother', as described by George Orwell in the novel '1984'. So it was when Russia had Stalin, and so it was when Germany had Hitler. This is now being repeated in Chechnya, under Ramzan Kadyrov. Such fear can spread throughout Russia.

Yet what can stand up to fear? However paradoxical it may be, purely and solely freedom of thought. This quality, possessed by Andrei Dmitrievich Sakharov to an unusual degree, made him impervious to fear. And watching him also freed others from fear.

Freedom of thought is the basis of all other freedoms.

That is why it is so appropriate for the Sakharov Prize to be called 'For Freedom of Thought'. We are proud to receive it today.

Sakharov human rights winner Lyudmila Alexeyeva arrested in Moscow

Some New Year goodwill was lacking from the Moscow police force when they briefly arrested some 50 human rights activists on 31 December. Among them was 82-year old Lyudmila Alexeyeva who in December was awarded Parliament's Sakharov human rights prize. They were detained whilst trying to prove their right to enjoy Article 31 of the Russian Constitution which guarantees the right to freedom of assembly.

In a statement the man who handed her the prize, Parliament's President Jerzy Buzek, said he was "deeply disappointed and shocked" and found the police action "absolutely disproportionate".

He went on to say that "in a democratic country, people should have right to organise protests, even against governments and authorities. Freedom of speech and expression is one of our basic human rights."

Writing on her blog after the arrest, Lyudmila Alexeyeva said that her arrest violated article 31 of the Russian Constitution and she demanded an apology from the authorities. With a small group of sympathisers she demonstrates at the end of every month to draw attention to the right to assembly which she feels is not respected by the Kremlin.

In her blog she promised legal help to those detained near Moscow's Triumph square. The good news for most of the demonstrators was that they were released from custody prior to midnight. The next march is planned for 31 January.