20 years of the Sakharov Prize: Human rights and reconciliation

The European Parliament awards the Sakharov Prize every year to people who have dedicated their lives to defending human rights and mutual understanding. This year the Sakharov Prize celebrates its 20th anniversary. To mark this occasion, we have grouped the winners by the causes they have espoused and defended. This week - those who strove for reconciliation.

Over the past 20 years the Sakharov Prize has gone to people and groups fighting to improve human rights. Several winners focused on the day to day struggle of common people: on their rights to live as human beings and their right to live in peace.

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.

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.

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.
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.

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.

Ibrahim Rugova and 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 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 1992.

The peacefult 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.

Nurit Peled-Elhanan and Izzat Ghazzawi

For decades, politicians all over the world have tried to resolve the friction between Israelis and Palestinians. But not everybody is prepared to wait for an elusive political solution. Two activists who received the award in 2001 represent hope and energy for reconciliation and for ending the conflict between Israel and Palestine.

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. 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.