



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. 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.