

Ladies and gentleman, dear colleagues,

It is a real honour for the European Parliament to welcome Mr Oleg Sentsov, the Sakharov Prize laureate of 2018. Released together with 35 others during prisoners exchange in September, Mr Sentsov has returned to Ukraine after serving five years of a twenty-year sentence for terrorism charges by the Russian court for his protest against the illegal occupation of his native Crimea.

Last year, he was still imprisoned in Siberia and the empty chair in this plenary had symbolised not only his fight for democracy but also the void in our society left by all those punished for speaking the truth. Void in the daily life of families, countries and global democratic community.

During his political process in Russia he had said - *I do not know what your convictions are worth if you aren't ready to suffer for them, or even to die.* His words have touched me deeply because indeed bravery is not a quality of the body, but the one of soul. - You have clearly stood by your principles and convictions Mr. Sentsov, for which you have paid a very high price of freedom. No person should ever pay for that.

Too many freedom fighters have to face the fear of losing their life or never seeing their families again because of unwillingness to conform and to be silent when human rights are being violated.

Journalists and artists are increasingly being targeted for their political expressions. Mr Sentsov had been released but many others, including bloggers and journalists like Stanyslav Aseev are still held hostage in Eastern Ukraine. We call for them to be freed.

We also call for the liberation of the other Sakharov laureates or finalists that are still in prison. Let me name Nasreen Sotoudeh (2012 laureate from Iran) who was once more arrested and sentenced to 38 years of jail this year, after being previously released. Others, such as Damas de Blanco (2005 laureates from Cuba) still face intimidation from the state authorities. Others still, such as Razan Zeitouneh (2011 laureate from Syria), have disappeared without a trace.

We did not forget any of these people. The European Union has been founded on the values of democracy and human rights. When human rights are challenged, when democracy is under pressure and the rule of law is undermined, we need the most courageous among us: the human rights defenders, trade unionists, journalists, bloggers and media workers, artists and publishers - all who dare to speak up on behalf of those who have no voice. There is no democracy without a vibrant and pluralistic civil society. We shall therefore do all we can to protect them.

Mr Sentsov, I pay tribute to your courage, persistence and determination. I am proud to honour you with this prize on behalf of the European Parliament.