European Parliament

Oleg Sentsov: The 2018 Sakharov Prize laureate

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Thirty years since it was first awarded, the European Parliament's Sakharov Prize for freedom of thought retains all its symbolic meaning, as human rights are continually under threat in many parts of the world. By awarding the 2018 Prize to the Ukrainian filmmaker Oleg Sentsov, Parliament aimed to increase the pressure on the Russian government to release him. The award also drew attention to all Ukrainian political prisoners in Russia and the annexed Crimean peninsula. On 7 September 2019, Sentsov was released as part of a major prisoner swap between Russia and Ukraine. He is due to receive the award in person in Strasbourg on 26 November 2019.

Sakharov Prize laureate 2018

Oleg Sentsov, a Ukrainian film-director, convicted in Russia to 20 years in prison for his opposition to the annexation of Crimea, is the 2018 laureate of the European Parliament's Sakharov Prize. Parliament's Conference of Presidents selected Sentsov (initially proposed by the EPP) from three finalists shortlisted by the Parliament's Foreign Affairs (AFET) and Development (DEVE) Committees. The two other finalists were **non-governmental organisations protecting human rights and saving migrant lives across the Mediterranean Sea** (proposed by S&D and the Greens/EFA Groups), and **Nasser Zefzafi**, the leader of a mass protest movement in the Rif region of Morocco, sentenced to 20 years in prison (proposed by GUE/NGL Group). The prize was awarded *in absentia* at a ceremony in the European Parliament during the December 2018 plenary session in Strasbourg, at which Sentsov was represented by a relative and his lawyer. Other laureates of the prize have also been prevented from attending because of detention, most recently Raif Badawi in 2015. Sentsov is the first laureate from eastern Europe since 2009, when the Russian human rights centre, Memorial, received the prize.

Significance of the prize

The European Parliament awards the Sakharov Prize for freedom of thought each year to individuals or organisations for their outstanding achievements in one of the following fields: defence of human rights and fundamental freedoms, particularly the right to free expression; safeguarding the rights of minorities; respect for international law; development of democracy and implementation of the rule of law. Created through a 13 December 1985 parliamentary resolution, the prize bears the name of prominent Soviet-era dissident, Andrei Sakharov, joint inventor of the Soviet hydrogen bomb, 1975 Nobel Peace Prize winner and campaigner for human rights and nuclear disarmament in the Soviet Union. The name of the prize illustrates his courageous defence of human rights, including the freedom of thought and expression, to the detriment of his professional career and personal freedom. The prize was awarded for the first time, jointly, in 1988, to Nelson Mandela and (posthumously) to Soviet dissident Anatoli Marchenko. Both Mandela and Marchenko embodied the bravery of the individual who stands up to the discretionary power of an oppressive regime and pays for it with their personal freedom. Mandela's story is widely known. Marchenko was one of the best-known dissidents in the Soviet Union. He died in 1986 after a three-month-long hunger strike for the release of all Soviet dissidents. The public outcry his death provoked pushed Mikhail Gorbachev to authorise the release of political prisoners from Soviet jails. His courageous action prefigures the similarly brave position of the 2018 laureate.

Oleg Sentsov: Ukrainian filmmaker and symbol for political prisoners

Born on 13 July 1976 in Simferopol (Crimea), Oleg Sentsov studied marketing at Kyiv State Economics University. He did not particularly enjoy these studies, which he said 'disillusioned' him. After managing a computer club in Simferopol and playing online video games professionally for years – eventually becoming the Ukrainian champion – Sentsov became the leader of the Crimean gaming movement. This experience of the gaming world served as inspiration for his first feature film *Gamer*, which was released in 2011 and later screened at a number of international film festivals.

This is an updated edition of an 'at a glance' note published in December 2018.

Euromaidan as a turning point for Ukraine — and for Sentsov

Sentsov's work on his film *Rhino*, about children of the 1990s, was interrupted in 2013, when he joined the [Revolution of Dignity](#) ('Euromaidan') that broke out in Ukraine after pro-Russia President Viktor Yanukovich decided to suspend talks on an EU-Ukraine Association Agreement. In February 2014, the protests paved the way for a new pro-European government and for Yanukovich's [ousting](#). When Moscow responded by illegally [annexing](#) Crimea and launching a [hybrid war](#) against Ukraine, Sentsov helped bring food to Ukrainian soldiers and organised [rallies](#) for a united Ukraine in Simferopol. The Russian Federal Security Service arrested Sentsov in Crimea in May 2014, and deported him to Russia. In what Amnesty International called a ['cynical show trial',](#) a Russian military court convicted Sentsov to 20 years imprisonment for plotting [terrorist acts](#) in August 2015. Sentsov denies the charges, which he and human rights groups call [politically](#) motivated. Sentsov said he was beaten for 24 hours in an attempt to force him to confess. Russian authorities [refused](#) to investigate the allegations of torture. In May 2018, Sentsov began a hunger strike, demanding the release of all Ukrainians held on political grounds in Russia and annexed Crimea. Sentsov [ended](#) the 145-day hunger strike on 6 October 2018. In a handwritten [statement](#), he [explained](#) that he had no choice but to halt the hunger strike to avoid being force-fed due to the critical state of his health.

International support, including from the EU and the European Parliament

The [European Union](#), the United States, the [UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights](#), human rights groups, [filmmakers'](#) and writers' associations and even Russian film-director [Nikita Mikhalkov](#), who has close links to Russian President Vladimir Putin, had all requested Sentsov's release. The High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice-President of the Commission (HR/VP) repeatedly underlined that Sentsov's detention breached international law, and urged Russia to return Sentsov and fellow activist Oleksandr Kolchenko to Ukraine. In a June 2018 [resolution](#), Parliament requested the immediate release of Sentsov and the 70 other Ukrainian citizens illegally detained in Russia and Crimea. [Announcing](#) the Sakharov Prize laureate in Strasbourg on 25 October 2018, then European Parliament President Antonio Tajani stated that Sentsov's 'courage and determination' has made him 'a symbol of the struggle for the release of political prisoners held in Russia and around the world'. With the award of the Sakharov Prize, Parliament is 'expressing its solidarity with him and his cause', Tajani said: 'We ask that he be released immediately'.

Responses to the 2018 Sakharov Prize

While Russia's Foreign Ministry [criticised](#) Parliament's award of the prize to Sentsov as 'absolutely politicised', others hailed the decision. [PEN America](#) called it 'a powerful statement in defence of writers, artists, political prisoners, and all those ... actively fighting for free thought and free expression in a time of creeping – and not so creeping – authoritarianism around the world'. Human Rights Watch [said](#) the award would help increase the pressure on Moscow to release Sentsov. European Council President Donald Tusk [renewed](#) his call on Moscow to 'free Sentsov and all other political prisoners following Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea'. Then Prime Minister of Ukraine, Volodymyr Groysman, expressed [gratitude](#) to Parliament for the award, which he called 'a strong message highlighting the necessity of democracy protection in the world'.

Sentsov's release in a landmark prisoner swap

Moscow [rejected](#) Kyiv's [calls](#) to swap Sentsov and Ukrainian journalist Roman Suschenko, arrested in Moscow in 2016 on espionage charges, for Russian prisoners, until 7 September 2019, when Ukrainian prisoners in Russia were exchanged for 35 prisoners held in Ukraine. The other Ukrainian prisoners released include Suschenko, as well as 24 Ukrainian sailors who were [detained](#) in November 2018, when Russia seized three Ukrainian Navy vessels off Crimea. Although the prisoner swap – in line with the 2014-2015 [Minsk Peace Agreements](#) – sparked [questions](#) about some of the prisoners released by Ukraine, the move was generally hailed by European leaders, including by the [HR/VP](#). The President of the European Parliament, David Sassoli, [expressed](#) 'relief and profound joy' at the release, adding that he looked forward to meeting Sentsov in person in Parliament and handing him the Sakharov Prize.