

The 2018 Sakharov Prize

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 continue to be embattled in many parts of the world. The courage of those who stand up for them therefore deserves to be widely recognised. By awarding the 2018 Prize to the Ukrainian filmmaker Oleg Sentsov – who is currently an inmate in a penal colony in Siberia – Parliament aims to increase the pressure on Russia to release Sentsov. At the same time, the award also draws attention to the struggle of all Ukrainian political prisoners currently behind bars in Russia and the annexed Crimean peninsula.

Background

Significance of the prize

The Sakharov Prize for freedom of thought is awarded each year by the European Parliament to individuals or organisations for their outstanding achievements in upholding human rights and fundamental freedoms. [Created](#) through a Parliamentary resolution of 13 December 1985, 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 prize was named after him in recognition of his courageous defence of human rights, among which the freedom of thought and expression, to the detriment of his professional career and personal freedom. The prize was awarded for the first time in 1988 jointly 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 paying 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 caused by his death pushed Mikhail Gorbachev to authorise the release of political prisoners from Soviet jails. His courageous action prefigures the similarly brave standing of the 2018 laureate (see below).

The prize is [awarded](#) for a specific achievement 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.

Selection procedure

Nominations can be made by political groups or by at least 40 Members of the European Parliament, and are submitted during a joint meeting of the European Parliament's Foreign Affairs (AFET) and Development (DEVE) Committees. This year, on 9 October 2018, the two committees shortlisted the following [three finalists](#) from among the [eight nominees](#): **Oleg Sentsov**, a Ukrainian film-director, convicted in Russia to 20 years in prison for his opposition to the annexation of Crimea (proposed by the EPP), **NGOs protecting human rights and saving migrant lives across the Mediterranean Sea** (proposed by S&D and the Greens/EFA), 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). The Conference of Presidents, composed of President Antonio Tajani and the leaders of the political groups, chose Oleg Sentsov, the Ukraine filmmaker detained in Russia, as this year's laureate. The prize, consisting of a certificate and €50 000, will be presented at a ceremony in the European Parliament during the plenary session in Strasbourg on 12 December 2018. All three finalists are invited to the award ceremony. This year's laureate will be represented by a relative and by his lawyer. Other laureates in the history 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.

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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 champion of Ukraine – Sentsov became the leader of the Crimean gaming movement. This experience from 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.

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 the [ousting](#) of Yanukovich. 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. Sentsov was arrested by the Russian Federal Security Service in Crimea in May 2014, and deported to Russia. In what Amnesty International called a '[cynical show trial](#)', a Russian military court in August 2015 convicted Sentsov to 20 years imprisonment for plotting [terrorist acts](#). 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 have [refused](#) to investigate the allegations of torture.

Increasing concerns over Sentsov's health after hunger strike

In May 2018, Sentsov began a hunger strike, demanding the release of all Ukrainians held on political grounds in Russia and annexed Crimea. Amid growing concern over Sentsov's health, Ukraine's Mission to the United Nations (UN) in June delivered an [official letter](#) on behalf of 38 countries to the UN Secretary-General. 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 by Russian authorities due to the critical state of his health. Kyiv's [calls](#) to swap Sentsov and Ukrainian journalist Roman Suschenko, arrested in Moscow in 2016 on espionage charges, for Russian prisoners, have so far been [rejected](#) by Moscow.

International support, including from the EU and the European Parliament

In addition to Ukraine, 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, have requested Sentsov's release. The High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy / Vice-President of the Commission, Federica Mogherini, has repeatedly underlined that Sentsov's detention breaches 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. After Sentsov ended his hunger strike, the European External Action Service [condemned](#) Russian authorities' refusal to provide Sentsov appropriate medical treatment. [Announcing](#) the Sakharov Prize laureate in Strasbourg on 25 October 2018, 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 decision as 'absolutely politicised', others hailed it. [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'. Ukrainian Prime Minister Volodymyr Groysman expressed [gratitude](#) to Parliament for the award, which he called 'a strong message highlighting the necessity of democracy protection in the world'.

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