

The 2017 Sakharov Prize

Established in 1988 by the European Parliament, the Sakharov Prize for freedom of thought is awarded each year in December to individuals or organisations for their outstanding achievements in upholding human rights and fundamental freedoms. By awarding the 2017 Prize to the Venezuelan Opposition, the Parliament denounces the situation in Venezuela, re-affirms its support to the democratically elected National Assembly, calls for a peaceful transition to democracy, and pays tribute to the Venezuelan people, in particular to those who have been unjustly jailed for expressing their opinions.

Background

Significance of the prize

The promotion of human rights and fundamental freedoms is a top [priority](#) of the European Parliament. To honour individuals and organisations who make exceptional efforts in defending human rights and fundamental freedoms, the Parliament, each year, awards the Sakharov Prize. The prize already has a long tradition, having been [created](#) through a resolution of 13 December 1985. It bears the name of prominent Soviet-era dissident, Andrei Sakharov, joint inventor of the Soviet hydrogen bomb, 1975 Peace Nobel 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 them the freedom of thought and expression, to the detriment of his professional career and personal freedom.

According to [the new statute](#) adopted in May 2003, 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. The prize was awarded for the first time in 1988 jointly to [Nelson Mandela](#) and (posthumously) to Soviet dissident [Anatoli Marchenko](#).

Selection procedure

Nominations can be made by political groups or by at least 40 Members. This year, nominations for the Sakharov award were formally submitted during a joint meeting of the Foreign Affairs (AFET) and Development (DEVE) Committees on 2 October 2017. **Aura Lolita Chavez Ixcaquic**, a human rights defender from Guatemala, the **Democratic Opposition in Venezuela**, and the Swedish-Eritrean journalist, **Dawit Isaak**, were named as this year's finalists for the Sakharov Prize, following a vote by the two committees on 10 October. On 26 October 2017, the Conference of Presidents, composed of President Antonio Tajani and the leaders of the political groups, chose the Democratic Opposition in Venezuela 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 13 December 2017. All the finalists are invited to the award ceremony and they are expected to hold various meetings in the Parliament. Julio Borges and Antonio Ledezma have confirmed their [presence](#), as has finalist Lolita Chávez. The third finalist, Dawit Isaak, has been imprisoned in Eritrea since 2001, and there has been no news from him since [2005](#).

The Democratic Opposition in Venezuela

The 2017 Sakharov Prize goes to the Democratic Opposition in Venezuela, in particular to the National Assembly (headed by [Julio Borges](#)) and the [political prisoners](#) listed by [Foro Penal Venezolano](#), represented by [Leopoldo López](#), [Antonio Ledezma](#), [Daniel Ceballos](#), [Yon Goicoechea](#), [Lorent Saleh](#), [Alfredo Ramos](#) and [Andrea González](#). The opposition to the 'chavista' government of the United Socialist Party of Venezuela ([PSUV](#)) is currently grouped in the [Democratic Unity Roundtable](#) (*Mesa de la Unidad Democrática* – [MUD](#)), a [coalition](#)



of parties from across the whole political spectrum, from centre-left to right. The MUD was established in 2008 to form a viable political alternative to then-President [Hugo Chávez](#). It lost by a [narrow margin](#) in the 2010 legislative and 2013 presidential elections, but finally got an [overwhelming majority](#) in the December 2015 parliamentary elections.

Venezuela's National Assembly

The current [National Assembly](#) led by the MUD opposition – with [65.27%](#) of the votes and a [two-thirds majority](#) (needed to modify constitutional laws or the constitution itself) – ran into problems with President Nicolas Maduro's government even before taking office, as the outgoing Assembly appointed [new judges](#) to the Supreme Court of Justice (TSJ), thus ensuring it favoured the government. The TSJ has, since then, been obstructing the [work](#) of the Parliament, as it has, among other things: 1) suspended [three MUD Members of Parliament](#), thus preventing it exercising two-thirds majority; 2) endorsed President Maduro's [economic emergency](#) decree, which had been rejected by the Assembly; 3) limited its [capacity](#) to exert political control over the remaining powers; 4) [declared](#) the unconstitutionality of the law on amnesty and national reconciliation, adopted by the National Assembly on 29 March, as well as that of the [reform](#) of Venezuela's Central Bank; 5) [suspended](#) the Assembly's rules of procedure as regards its internal debates; 6) and even took over the [legislative powers](#) of the National Assembly, although it reversed this [decision](#) a few days later. The pro-government Venezuelan national electoral council (CNE) also played an important [role](#), first delaying, and finally suspending the National Assembly's initiative to trigger a [recall referendum](#) against President Maduro.

Another blow to the National Assembly has been delivered by the controversial [National constituent assembly \(ANC\)](#) elected in July 2017 at the initiative of President Maduro, after adapting the election rules to favour pro-government candidates and bypassing a referendum on the subject. The National Assembly reacted by holding its own [referendum](#) – which resulted in nearly [7.2 million votes](#), and 98 % against the constitutional change – and appointing new judges to the TSJ. Both of these moves were declared illegal by the government and the TSJ. The National Assembly also organised [protests](#) prior to the ANC elections. The ANC has, among other [measures](#): a) dismissed Attorney General, [Luisa Ortega](#); b) created the [Commission](#) on truth, justice, peace and public tranquillity, considered by civil society organisations as a mechanism for the persecution of dissenters; c) taken over the [powers](#) of the National Assembly to legislate on a wide range of issues; d) voted to put opposition [leaders](#) on trial for treason; e) and, more recently, removed the immunity of Assembly Vice-President, [Freddy Guevara](#). Despite all this, the National Assembly, led by its President, [Julio Borges](#), has continued to defend Venezuela's legal democratic order and denounce the situation in international fora, such as the [Organisation of American States \(OAS\)](#) and the European Union (EU).

Political prisoners

In the past few years (2014-2017), street [protests](#) led by the opposition against the government have been heavily [repressed](#) by the security forces, resulting in numerous [deaths](#) and imprisonment of government opponents, including prominent politicians like Leopoldo López, Antonio Ledezma – who recently escaped from house arrest – and Daniel Ceballos. The UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights has recently published a damning [report](#), denouncing 'extensive human rights violations and abuses' in the context of anti-government demonstrations. According to the [October 2017 report](#) on repression in Venezuela published by the Foro Penal Venezolano, as of 31 October 2017, there were 444 people under arrest, 380 political prisoners, and 198 civilians in jail after having been judged by [military courts](#).

European Parliament's position on Venezuela

When announcing this year's Sakharov Prize laureate in the October II plenary, the President of the European Parliament, [Antonio Tajani](#), underlined that it was the Parliament's duty to denounce 'the unacceptable situation in Venezuela', where citizens have been deprived 'of their fundamental rights'. With this choice, the Parliament is reaffirming its 'unwavering support to the democratically elected National Assembly' and calling for a 'peaceful transition to democracy'. President Tajani further stated that, besides recognising the opposition's 'courageous struggle', the Parliament also 'wants to express its proximity to and pay tribute to the Venezuelan people', including those 'unjustly jailed for expressing their opinion'. The Parliament has successively stated its position on Venezuela in its resolutions of [13 September 2017](#), of [27 April 2017](#), [8 June 2016](#), and [12 March 2015](#), and has also dealt with this subject in the framework of the Euro-Latin American Parliamentary Assembly (EuroLat).

For further information, see also our briefing on [The Political crisis in Venezuela](#).