

Sakharov's legacy on the centenary of his birth

Andrey Sakharov was a Soviet physicist who played a leading role in his country's nuclear weapons programme. However, in the 1960s he fell out of favour with the regime due to his activism for disarmament and human rights. On the 100th anniversary of his birth, Sakharov's legacy is more relevant than ever. Since 1988, the European Parliament has awarded an annual prize for freedom of thought named after him.

Andrey Sakharov: Scientist, disarmament campaigner, human rights defender

Born on 21 May 1921 in Moscow, Andrey Sakharov was a [physicist](#) who in 1948 joined the Soviet [atomic programme](#), where he played a leading role in work that led to the country's first successful test of an atomic bomb in 1949. In the 1950s, Sakharov helped to develop the first Soviet hydrogen bomb and the Tsar Bomba, the largest atomic bomb ever exploded.

However, by the late 1950s Sakharov was becoming increasingly concerned about the dangers of these new weapons; together with other nuclear scientists, he persuaded the Soviet authorities to sign a [partial test ban treaty](#) with the US and UK in 1963, prohibiting atmospheric and underwater nuclear tests. Sakharov's opposition to antiballistic missile defences, which he felt would increase the risk of nuclear war, eventually put him at loggerheads with the Soviet regime.

In 1968, Sakharov wrote his '[Reflections](#) on Progress, Peaceful Co-Existence, and Intellectual Freedom', warning of the dangers of nuclear weapons and criticising the repression of dissidents. The essay was never published in the Soviet Union, but typewritten copies circulated widely and reached [Western media](#). As a result, he was excluded from weapons research, and instead turned to theoretical fields such as particle physics and cosmology.

Previously celebrated as a '[hero](#) of Socialist labour', Sakharov was increasingly regarded as a dissident from then on. In 1970, he co-founded the [Moscow Human Rights Committee](#). His tireless defence of those unjustly persecuted and imprisoned brought him international fame, culminating in the 1975 award of the Nobel Peace Prize, but at home he was [denounced](#) by KGB head, Yury Andropov, as 'domestic enemy No 1'. After Sakharov [criticised](#) the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, authorities stripped him of his honours and exiled him to Gorky (now Nizhny Novgorod), a city that was closed to foreigners.

With perestroika in full swing, in 1986 Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, [invited](#) Sakharov to resume his 'patriotic work'. Back in Moscow, Sakharov played a leading role in organising the Soviet Union's emerging independent civil society. In 1989, he was elected as an opposition member of the Parliament, where he [demanded](#) an end to the Communist Party's monopoly on power. A few months later, he died of a heart attack.

Sakharov's legacy in Russia

Sakharov's achievements, as both a scientist and a human rights defender, are still honoured in Russia. Buildings and streets are named after him, such as Sakharov Avenue in Moscow, which has become a popular protest venue. There are Sakharov museums in Nizhny Novgorod and Moscow. In 2019, Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a presidential [decree](#) envisaging a series of events, such as [exhibitions](#) and [debates](#), to commemorate the centenary of his birth, and in 2020 [expressed](#) support for the idea of a statue in Moscow, in addition to the one that already exists in Nizhny Novgorod.

As in [2014](#) (the 25th anniversary of Sakharov's death), official centenary celebrations are likely to be fairly low-key. Praise for Sakharov's human rights work mostly comes from civil society and fringe [opposition politicians](#), rather than the political establishment. Official endorsement of Sakharov sits uneasily with Russia's increasingly [repressive environment](#) for human rights defenders who continue his work.

Among the latter is [Memorial](#), an NGO co-founded by Sakharov, which documents Soviet-era human rights abuses and was [awarded](#) the European Parliament's Sakharov Prize in 2009. In 2015, Russia's Justice Ministry

declared Memorial a '[foreign agent](#)', a stigmatising label that exposes it to legal harassment and undercuts public support. In 2018, Oyub Titiev, the organisation's representative in Chechnya, was [arrested](#) and charged with possession of drugs, which Titiev claims were planted by police in his car. A few days later, unknown perpetrators [torched](#) Memorial's Ingushetia office, also in the Caucasus. Vandals [attacked](#) the Sakharov Centre in Moscow, another alleged 'foreign agent', which houses a museum on Sakharov and his archives.

Although mass protests following Alexey Navalny's arrest in January 2021 show that many Russians are still ready to stand up for their rights, mainstream public opinion is often sceptical of the values promoted by Sakharov during his lifetime. There is increasing nostalgia for the Soviet era, remembered in February 2020 as 'the greatest in the history of our country, with a high level of well-being and opportunities for ordinary citizens' by [75 %](#) of respondents to a survey by independent pollster Levada Centre. [Nearly half](#) of them believe it would have been better if the liberalising reforms of perestroika, which restored Sakharov's freedom, had never happened. In 2017, asked to name the most outstanding historical figures of all time, Russians put Stalin in [top place](#); Gorbachev came last, while Sakharov is mentioned nowhere on the list.

The significance of the Sakharov Prize

Several Sakharov Prizes are awarded around the world, including in Russia (for [journalism](#)) and the US (for [scientists](#) upholding human rights). At its July 1984 plenary session, the [European Parliament](#) debated the idea of leaving a seat vacant for Andrei Sakharov and thus symbolically for other human rights defenders; however, in the end it was French MEP Jean-François Deniau's proposal for an annual human rights award named after Sakharov that prevailed, in a resolution adopted in December 1985. The idea was discussed with Sakharov himself, who agreed to the use of his name. The first prize was awarded in 1988 jointly to Nelson Mandela and, on Sakharov's proposal, posthumously to Soviet dissident [Anatoly Marchenko](#); international outrage at Marchenko's death in 1986 after a three-month hunger strike in jail had prompted Mikhail Gorbachev to release many of the country's remaining political prisoners.

The prize is awarded each year by the European Parliament to individuals or organisations for their outstanding achievements in one of the following areas: human rights and fundamental freedoms, particularly the freedom of expression; safeguarding the rights of minorities; respect for international law; development of democracy; and implementation of the rule of law.

Although much has changed since 1988, the work of human rights defenders in repressive regimes remains as [difficult](#) and dangerous as ever. In a globalised world, human rights causes can reach a global audience more easily, and the Sakharov Prize helps to raise international awareness. Each year, its award makes the headlines of newspapers in Europe and beyond.

The ordeal of many Sakharov laureates continues

Although the Sakharov Prize helps to rally international support for human rights defenders, laureates continue to suffer [harsh reprisals](#) in countries such as Belarus, Cuba, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Venezuela. In China, Uyghur human rights defender and economics professor, [Ilham Tohti](#), awarded the Sakharov Prize in 2019, has been in jail since 2014; [Hu Jia](#), a prominent Chinese human rights activist and 2008 laureate is under constant police surveillance and repeated house arrest; after 18 years of imprisonment, long-time democracy activist and 1996 laureate, [Wei Jingsheng](#), was forced into exile. Raif Badawi, a liberal Saudi blogger and 2015 laureate, has served a 10-year jail sentence since 2012, facing torture and threats to his life in prison. Despite serious health [concerns](#), Iranian human rights lawyer and 2012 laureate, [Nasrin Soutoudeh](#), has spent years in jail due to her human rights [activism](#). Many members of the [Venezuelan](#) and [Belarussian](#) opposition (collective winners of the prize, in 2017 and 2020 respectively) have been imprisoned or forced into exile.

Apart from the award of the Sakharov Prize itself, EU support for laureates includes resolutions, statements and diplomatic démarches. Foreign governments do not always respond favourably; for example, Beijing [accused](#) the European Parliament of 'celebrating a terrorist', after Ilham Tohti won the 2019 prize. Nevertheless, the Sakharov Prize may have helped to secure the release of laureates, such as Nasrin Soutoudeh in 2013 (although she has since been sent back to jail) and [Oleg Sentsov](#) in 2019, by focussing international attention on their cases. For others, Sakharov laureate status may at least have afforded some protection from torture and harsher treatment while in prison.

