

2021 Sakharov Prize laureate: Alexey Navalny

Respect for fundamental freedoms is a core value of the EU, which it promotes through its external policy. The European Parliament's Sakharov Prize honours the work of human rights defenders. With human rights under attack in many parts of the world, the Prize remains as relevant as ever. This year it is awarded to Russian opposition activist Alexey Navalny, whose brave refusal to be silenced recalls the work of Soviet-era dissidents such as Andrey Sakharov. The Sakharov Prize will be presented at a ceremony during the European Parliament's December plenary session, although Navalny himself will be unable to attend due to his being in jail.

Significance of the Sakharov Prize

Every year since 1988, the European Parliament has awarded the [Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought](#) to individuals or organisations for outstanding achievement in defending human rights and fundamental freedoms. Initiated by a 1985 parliamentary resolution, the prize is named after [Andrey Sakharov](#), the eminent Soviet-Russian nuclear physicist, dissident, human rights activist and 1975 Nobel Peace Prize winner. The prize symbolises Sakharov's courageous defence of human rights, notably the freedom of thought and expression, and personal freedom, that were at times denied him during his life.

Award procedure and the 2021 Sakharov Prize finalists and laureate

Political groups, or [at least 40 Members](#) of the European Parliament, [nominate](#) the candidates for the Sakharov Prize each year. From the list of [nominees](#), three finalists are then shortlisted in a joint vote of the Committees on Foreign Affairs and Development, as well as the Subcommittee on Human Rights.

The three finalists for the 2021 Sakharov Prize were: 1) **Alexey Navalny**; 2) a group of 11 **Afghan women** fighting for equality and human rights; and 3) former Bolivian interim president **Jeanine Áñez**, currently detained on terrorism, sedition and conspiracy charges. On 20 October 2021, Parliament's Conference of Presidents decided to award the Prize to Alexey Navalny.

[Announcing](#) the decision, Parliament Vice-President Heidi Hautala (Greens/EFA, Finland) praised Navalny for his courageous defence of human rights and fundamental freedoms in Russia, which had cost him his freedom and nearly his life. President David Sassoli reiterated 'the European Parliament's unwavering support for his immediate release'. [Thanking](#) the Parliament for the prize, which he described as both an honour and a great responsibility, Navalny dedicated it to 'all kinds [of] anti-corruption fighters around the world ... I wish them perseverance and courage even in the scariest of moments'. For his part, Russian presidential spokesperson [Dmitry Peskov](#) said he had no respect for the Parliament's decision, which in his opinion 'significantly devalues the meaning' of concepts such as freedom of thought.

In recent years, the Sakharov Prize has shown a strong focus on the post-Soviet region, with previous winners including the [Belarussian democratic opposition](#) (2020) and Ukrainian film director [Oleg Sentsov](#) (2018). In 1988 the prize was awarded posthumously to Soviet dissident Anatoly Marchenko (jointly with Nelson Mandela), and in 2009 it was given to Memorial, the Russian human rights movement co-founded by Andrey Sakharov.

Alexey Navalny – Blogger, anti-corruption campaigner and opposition leader

Former lawyer Navalny's political career began with the centrist Yabloko party, which he left in 2007. After a brief period of experimentation with [nationalist politics](#), it was his characterisation of the pro-Putin United Russia as the 'party of crooks and thieves' in a February 2011 interview on local radio which brought him national fame. The slogan resonated widely and was frequently repeated during huge post-election [protests](#) triggered by allegations of industrial-scale vote-rigging in favour of United Russia during the December 2011 parliamentary vote; by April 2013, a survey showed the number of people agreeing with Navalny's view of the party had risen to [over 51 %](#).

Navalny spent several days in jail for his part in the 2011–2012 protests. Legal harassment continued over the following years, with repeated arrests, short [jail sentences](#) on charges such as organising unauthorised protests, and fines. In 2012, criminal [charges](#) were brought against Navalny for embezzlement from state timber company [Kirovles](#) and the Russian subsidiary of [Yves Rocher](#), resulting in suspended sentences for Navalny and a jail sentence for his brother Oleg. Later, the European Court of Human Rights [ruled](#) that both cases had violated his right to a fair trial.

In 2013, he stood as candidate in the [Moscow mayoral election](#), scoring an unexpectedly high 27 % of the vote – almost enough to force Kremlin-backed incumbent Sergey Sobyenin into a second-round run-off. Not counting his candidacy for Yabloko in the 2005 Moscow regional assembly elections, this was the only election contested by Navalny to date; his bid to stand in the 2018 presidential election was [barred](#) on the grounds of his suspended sentence from the Kirovles case. In 2019, the Justice Ministry [blocked](#) Navalny's latest attempt to register a political party, claiming that a 'Russia of the Future' party already existed.

In 2018, Navalny launched a '[smart voting](#)' initiative, aimed at defeating Putin's United Russia by encouraging tactical voting for opposition candidates, including those from the relatively docile, officially sanctioned 'system opposition' parties such as the Communists. In the 2019 elections to the Moscow regional assembly, the scheme helped to slash the ruling party's majority from 38 out of 45 seats to just 25; it also played a part in opposition victories in the 2020 round of regional and local elections.

Work by Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation has attracted considerable attention. A January 2021 [video](#) exposing a US\$1 billion Black Sea palace allegedly built for Putin has been watched 120 million times, beating the previous record set by his 2017 [documentary](#) on then-prime minister Dmitry Medvedev (44 million views), which sparked huge anti-corruption [protests](#) in several Russian cities.

Although Navalny has millions of followers on social media, only a minority support his political agenda. While a February 2021 [poll](#) showed unusually low levels of confidence in Putin (32 %), just 4 % expressed trust in Navalny. Even so, his charisma, skilful use of social media and network of dedicated followers make him the most serious potential challenger to Putin's regime. His success in drawing attention to elite corruption and undermining support for United Russia makes him a potentially serious [threat](#), especially in the current context of growing discontent at declining living standards and persistent inequality.

With crucial [parliamentary elections](#) scheduled for September 2021, efforts to eliminate that threat stepped up a gear. In August 2020, Navalny [survived](#) what was apparently a bungled attempt by the Federal Security Service (FSB) to poison him with chemical weapon Novichok by smearing it onto his underpants. Returning from treatment in Germany in January 2021, he was immediately arrested and sent to jail for nearly three years, for allegedly violating the terms of his suspended sentence from the Yves Rocher case. In March, he began a 23-day-long [hunger strike](#), claiming that he was being denied adequate medical treatment.

Soon afterwards, the courts [ruled](#) that organisations linked to Navalny were 'extremist', forcing them to close down. Under Kremlin pressure, Facebook and Apple [removed](#) the smart voting app from their online stores. Speaking from prison in August 2021, Navalny [acknowledged](#) that the crackdown had achieved its goal of silencing his movement ahead of elections, but remained confident that 'sooner or later ... Russia will move on to a democratic, European path of development'.

European Parliament position. The European Parliament has repeatedly expressed its concerns about Navalny's situation, most recently in its January 2021 [resolution](#) on his arrest. The resolution condemned the politically motivated detention of Alexei Navalny and his supporters, which violates Russia's international commitments to human rights and the rule of law, and called for his immediate and unconditional release. The Parliament saw the attempted assassination and arrest as part of a systemic effort to silence and eliminate dissident voices ahead of the autumn 2021 parliamentary elections.

EEAS. Statements by High Representative Josep Borrell and other EU diplomats have [condemned](#) the use of politically motivated criminal sentences to exclude Alexey Navalny from the 2018 presidential election, [called](#) on Russia to transparently investigate his poisoning with a banned chemical weapon, [demanded](#) his release, and reminded the Russian authorities of their responsibility for his safety and health in prison.

The EU has adopted [chemical weapons sanctions](#) against Russian officials for the attempted poisoning of Navalny, and [human rights sanctions](#) for his arrest and for the repression of the subsequent protests.

