



Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought 2011

Focus

EP President Jerzy Buzek announced 27 October that five Arab Spring activists will be awarded the 2011 Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought for their contribution to historic changes in the Arab world and as a "symbol for all those working for dignity, democracy and fundamental rights in the Arab world and beyond". The prize was awarded on 14 December during a formal sitting in Strasbourg.

Read on to find out more about the eventual winners and the nominees for this year's award.

Nominees were chosen by political groups and a short list of three were chosen by the Foreign Affairs, Development and Human Rights Committees. The winner was chosen by the political group leaders.

Last year's winner Guillermo Fariñas was prevented by Cuban authorities from attending the award ceremony in Strasbourg.

The prize is named after Soviet scientist Andrei Sakharov, who was internally exiled in the Soviet Union for his opposition to the USSR's nuclear programme and repressive policies. He became a member of Mikhail Gorbachev's reformed Soviet Parliament in spring 1989 and founded Memorial, a human rights organisation that keeps his fight alive even after his death in 1989.

Sakharov prize laureates grateful for Europe's support to Arab Spring

"By awarding the Sakharov Prize to the five Arab Spring activists, the European Parliament recognises the efforts of all those who struggle for dignity, basic freedoms and political change in the Arab world", said President Buzek at the Sakharov Prize award ceremony on Wednesday in Strasbourg.

Mr Buzek pointed out that: "The historical events also remind us of our responsibilities, including the need to support an emerging, young and vibrant civil society" and he underlined the "decisive role played by women during the Arab Spring".

The winners expressed their gratitude for the prize as an important symbol of Europe's vital support during the Arab Spring uprisings. They also pointed to the human rights challenges that their countries still face in their efforts to rebuild and set up genuinely democratic regimes that respect justice and human dignity.

Only two of the laureates were able to attend the award ceremony in person: Asmaa Mahfouz, a young blogger from Egypt, and Ahmed El-Senussi, Libya's longest-serving prisoner of conscience. Parliament observed a minute's silence in memory of Mohamed Bouazizi, whose self-immolation in protest at the Tunisian authorities' repression sparked widespread protests and who was awarded the prize posthumously, and of all those who lost their lives in the uprisings.

In her acceptance speech, Asmaa Mahfouz said: "This reward pays homage to all those people in Egypt who have been much more courageous than me and actually sacrificed their lives on the streets. I would like to tell you how proud I am for all the martyrs of Arab revolution. We will not betray them, we will follow the road."

Ahmed El-Senussi pointed to the importance of reconciliation: "We need to rebuild our country, showing tolerance even towards those who committed crimes, who violated human dignity." He thanked Libya's European neighbours, the first to go to Libya's aid, for their "unambiguous diplomatic and military support".

The Syrian cartoonist, Ali Ferzat, who is exiled in Kuwait, sent a video message in which he voiced his gratitude for the prize and also his grief and sorrow at the number of victims in his home country Syria which "increases with every minute".

Syrian human rights lawyer Razan Zaitouneh, who is in hiding, sent a letter saying: "I would like to thank the European Parliament and everyone who has empathized with the uprising of our people, and who has supported it in whatsoever way, for the sake of a tomorrow free of repression, prisons, and blood-spilling. For all brave people in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Bahrain and beyond. For those who got their freedom, and those who are still struggling for it."

2011 Sakharov prize laureates

Ms Asmaa Mahfouz

Asmaa Mahfouz is a young Egyptian blogger whose Youtube videos brought thousands of people onto the streets to protest against the repressive regime of President Hosni Mubarak.

Mr Ahmed El-Senussi

Ahmed El-Senussi was Libya's longest-serving prisoner of conscience, detained for 31 years following an attempted coup against the former dictator Gaddafi.

Mr Mohamed Bouazizi

Mohammed Bouazizi was a young street salesman whose self-immolation sparked widespread protests within hours that finally led to the fall of the Tunisian regime.

Mr Ali Ferzat

Ali Ferzat is a Syrian cartoonist known for his caricatures ridiculing Arab dictators. He fled Syria after he was attacked in August and had both his hands broken.

Mrs Razan Zaitouneh

Razan Zaitouneh is a human rights lawyer from Syria who went into hiding after being accused by the government of being a foreign agent because of her daily reports on her website ShRIL and to foreign media of the atrocities against civilians in Syria.

The Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought

The Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought, named in honour of the Soviet physicist and political dissident Andrei Sakharov, has been awarded by the European Parliament every year since 1988 and has become a well known symbol of the fight for human rights and democracy.

Sakharov winner Asmaa Mahfouz: social media was our alternative media

Her videos, tweets and Facebook posts helped topple the Mubarak regime. But receiving the European Parliament's Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought doesn't mark the end of her fight against oppression. We spoke with her about the challenges faced by Egypt and her vision of a democratic Islam.

How important were the Internet and social media for the Arab Spring in Egypt?

Social media was the alternative media for us. This is how we managed to convey to people what we were going through and reveal to them the reality of Mubarak's regime. We announced our demonstrations and got people to participate in them. Social media was key to reaching critical mass.

But the current regime is using social media to counter-attack. It creates fake activist accounts, gives false information and spreads rumours. And so it creates the impression that the people on the street are for the current regime.

The current regime, the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF), has realised the mistakes Mubarak made in dealing with the revolution and is trying to turn the means we used against him to break us.

Are you afraid the old regime will return?

The current regime is part of the old order, so we cannot really say that the old regime has ended. But they are even more ferocious than the old guard. They are using all possible means to take revenge on those calling for an end to military rule.

And they are doing something very dangerous. They are creating animosity between the armed forces and the Egyptian people, something that didn't exist before. Those in the armed forces that object to the atrocities of the SCAF are imprisoned and tortured.

What do you think about the success of Islamist parties in Tunisia and Egypt?

You should try to better understand Islam and not just look at Islamists as the only representatives of Islam. As Baroness Ashton said yesterday, Islam is a great religion and you should not fall for the deformation of Islam by some extremists.

What could the EU and EP do to support the transition to democracy in the Arab world?

I am against any form of foreign intervention, but I think the EP should insist on the application of universal humanitarian laws. It should use its relationships with governments to convince them to stop supporting the SCAF with weapons and other means. But it is up to Egyptian civil society to make sure that human rights are applied and upheld in Egypt.

Will the Sakharov Prize help your cause?

It might not be useful for my cause in Egypt, but it will help me work for peace and humanitarian values at an international level. Our bigger aim is to create better relationships between countries. Once people all over the world have attained their right they can be more creative and more productive.

Sakharov winner Ahmed El Senussi: I don't ask for revenge

Once Libya's longest serving political prisoner, Ahmed El Senussi is now one of the country's leaders. Before he received the European Parliament's Sakharov Prize for Freedom of thought in Strasbourg we spoke with him about his struggle and Libya's future.

Will receiving the Sakharov Prize help rebuild Libya?

It will be of great help to me and the Libyan people, because this is the first time that a Libyan received such a prize. So if you help me to do my job properly it will help the Libyan people.

What could the EU and EP do to support the transition in Libya?

The EU can help a lot because we are trying to rebuild our country and European countries have vast experience in rebuilding after the (second world) war and we need all the help we can get, because we are building from scratch.

What is the situation in Libya at the moment?

The Libyan people are extremely happy today, because they got rid of the dictator. They are looking forward to a new future built on democracy and freedom of expression. Some people might think that Libya could descend into civil war, but there is no way that this is going to happen. People will do everything that they can to keep this new liberty and freedom.

There have been elections in Tunisia and Egypt. When will Libya follow?

Tunisia and Egypt are different cases, because they have systems in place, with security forces and an army. In Libya we lack all that so we have to start from scratch. So, for the time being we can not say when elections will take place. First we have to build a strong state, an army and police forces. And after that we will have elections.

You were imprisoned for more than 30 years. Did you ever lose hope?

No. First of all, I am a Muslim and I believe even if you face very hard times, you should remain patient. These 31 years were a test for me and I managed to survive.

The second reason was that I believe in what I did for my country (staged a coup against Gaddafi) and that helped me withstand the difficult conditions in prison. And now these efforts have been rewarded and I am very happy.

Can you forgive those that stole your life?

I forgive them because I know that people sometimes do things that they are not convinced about. There is someone who tortured me while I was in prison and I see him now in Benghazi, but I never think about doing anything to him. I leave him to his conscience. My dream has come true. I don't ask for revenge.

The Arab Spring wins Sakharov Prize 2011

The European Parliament Sakharov Prize for freedom of thought in 2011 goes to five representatives of the Arab people, in recognition and support of their drive for freedom and human rights. It will be presented to the winners by President Jerzy Buzek at Parliament's formal session in Strasbourg, on 14 December.

Parliament's 2011 Sakharov Prize goes to Asmaa Mahfouz (Egypt), Ahmed El Senussi (Libya), Razan Zaitouneh (Syria), Ali Ferzat (Syria) and posthumously to Mohamed Bouazizi (Tunisia). This nomination was submitted jointly by the EPP, S&D, ALDE and Green groups.

Following the decision by the Conference of Presidents (Parliament President and political group leaders) Thursday morning, President Buzek underlined "these individuals contributed to historic changes in the Arab world and this award reaffirms Parliament's solidarity and firm support for their struggle for freedom, democracy and the end of authoritarian regimes". He added, their award was "a symbol for all those working for dignity, democracy and fundamental rights in the Arab world and beyond."

Asmaa Mahfouz

Ms Mahfouz joined the Egyptian April 6th Youth Movement in 2008, helping to organise strikes for fundamental rights. Sustained harassment of journalists and activists by the Mubarak regime as well as the Tunisian example prompted Ms Mahfouz to organise her own protests. Her Youtube videos, Facebook and Twitter posts helped motivate Egyptians to demand their rights in the Tahrir Square. After being detained by the Supreme Council of Armed forces, she was released on bail due to pressure from prominent activists.

Ahmed El Senussi

Mr Ahmed El Senussi, also known as the longest-serving "prisoner of conscience", spent 31 years in Libyan prisons as a result of an attempted coup against Colonel Gaddafi. A member of the National Transitional Council, he is now working to "achieve freedom and race to catch up with humanity" and establish democratic values in post-Gaddafi Libya.

Razan Zaitouneh

Ms Zaitouneh, a human rights lawyer, created the Syrian Human Rights Information Link blog (SHRIL) which reports on current atrocities in Syria. She publicly revealed murders and human rights abuses committed by the Syrian army and police. Her posts have become an important source of information for international media. She is now hiding from the authorities who accuse her of being a foreign agent and have arrested her husband and younger brother.

Ali Ferzat

Mr Ferzat, a political satirist, is a well-known critic of the Syrian regime and its leader President Bashar al-Assad. Mr Ferzat became more straightforward in his cartoons when the March 2011 uprisings began. His caricatures ridiculing Bashar al-Assad's rule helped to inspire revolt in Syria. In August 2011, the Syrian security forces beat him badly, breaking both his hands as "a warning", and confiscated his drawings.

Mohamed Bouazizi

Mr Bouazizi, a Tunisian market trader set himself on fire in protest at incessant humiliation and badgering by the Tunisian authorities. Public sympathy and anger inspired by this gesture led to the ousting of Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. Mr Bouazizi's self-immolation also sparked uprisings and vital changes in other Arab countries such as Egypt and Libya, collectively known as the "Arab Spring".

Sakharov Prize for freedom of thought

Focus

The Sakharov Prize for freedom of thought, named in honour of the Soviet physicist and political dissident Andrei Sakharov, has been awarded by the European Parliament every year since 1988 to individuals or organizations that have made an important contribution to the fight for human rights or democracy. The prize is accompanied by an award of €50,000.

This year, the other two shortlisted finalists were Belarusian civil activist and journalist Dzmitry Bandarenka and the Columbian San José de Apartadó Peace Community.

Mohamed Bouazizi

Mohamed Bouazizi proves that history is not written only by military leaders or politicians. A market trader from a small town in the Tunisian hinterland, Bouazizi was one among many young men frustrated by oppression and a lack of prospects.

He had complained about harassment by officials previously, but the confiscation of his wares in December 2010 and a further beating by officials pushed him over the edge. Tragically, in protest, he set himself on fire in front of the governor's office. Bystanders tried to douse the flames, but he was severely burned and succumbed to his injuries on 4 January 2011.

In an attempt to calm public outrage, Tunisia's long-time President Ben Ali visited the comatose Bouazizi in hospital. But public sympathy and anger inspired by Bouazizi's death finally led to the ousting of Ben Ali and his regime. Uprisings also erupted in other North African and Arab countries such as Egypt, Libya and Syria, collectively known as the "Arab Spring".

Ali Ferzat

Ali Ferzat's weapon is the pen. A political satirist and leader of the Arab Cartoonists' Association, Ferzat's more than 15,000 caricatures have been ridiculing dictators for decades. A less than favourable portrait of the Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein led to the latter calling for Ferzat's death in 1989. His cartoons are banned in Libya and Jordan.

Despite the danger, Ferzat has never ceased to criticise the abuse of power abroad and in his home country of Syria. But when the Arab Spring uprisings began to spread to Syria in March 2011, he became more daring than before. His caricatures ridiculing Bashar al-Assad's rule helped to inspire the revolt.

⌋

Unfortunately, the regime didn't share his sense of humour and on 25 August he was reportedly pulled from his vehicle in Umayyad Square in central Damascus by masked gunmen. He was then badly beaten and his hands were broken. Passersby later found him dumped at the side of the airport road and took him to hospital. His briefcase and the drawings in them were allegedly confiscated by the assailants.

Syrian opposition members expressed outrage at his ordeal, and several online activists changed their Facebook profile picture to that of the hospitalised Ferzat in solidarity with the cartoonist.

« I devote my cartoons to contemporary ideals: freedom, democracy, love, and peace. I pitted them against contemporary evils: injustice, repression, dictatorship, terrorism, environmental degradation, corruption »

Ali Ferzat

Razan Zaitouneh

Although she is one the five winners of this year's Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought, the Parliament decided not to publish photos of Razan Zaitouneh, who is still in hiding from the government somewhere in Syria.

A human rights lawyer and a journalist, she created a blog called "Syrian Human Rights Information Link" (SHRIL), which reported on atrocities in Syria. She publicly revealed murders and human rights abuses committed by the Syrian army and police.

⌋

Her posts and tweets were an important source of information for the international media. She is now hiding from the authorities who accuse her of being a foreign agent and have arrested her husband and younger brother.

Among her causes are the defence of the rights of political prisoners in Syria. She was raising funds to ensure their defence and denounced systematic violations of human rights by the authorities on her blog.

Her aim is the sacking of President Bassar Al Assad and his trial before the International Criminal Court.

Aware of her growing influence, Assad's forces tried to silence her. On May 12, security forces searched her home and tried to arrest her. They did not find her and instead arrested her husband and detained him for over three months in an unknown location. According to a source at Front Line, the aged parents of Razan Zaitouneh also had to flee to escape arrest.

On 8. September, Razan Zaitouneh's posted her last twitter entry. In a telephone interview published on 14 November from Damascus. She said that protests continue and that the death count has gone beyond the 3,500 estimated by the UN's High Commissioner for Human Rights.

« The most beautiful part of the Syrian revolution is the high spirits of the Syrian people, who turned the protests into carnivals of song, dancing and chants of freedom, despite the bullets, arrests and tanks »

Razan Zaitouneh

Ahmed EL Senussi

Also known as Zubeir Ahmed El-Sharif , this great-nephew of the last Libyan king and author of a failed coup d'état seems like an unlikely contender for a human rights prize, but his life and actions show how deceptive first impressions can be.

In the early 70s, shortly after a low-ranking Libyan officer staged a coup against King Idris, EL Senussi wanted to rid Libya of Gaddafi and offer the country the choice between restoring the monarchy or installing a republic. But the coup failed and he was sentenced to death. For 18 years he received no visitors and the first nine years in prison were marked by solitary confinement and torture. The windows of his cell were blocked; he didn't see sunlight for years.

⌋

His wife died during this time, but he only learned of her death years later. In 2001, on the 32nd anniversary of Gaddafi's coup, he was pardoned . His health was ruined. He had spent 31 years in prison, six years longer than Nobel Peace Prize laureate Nelson Mandela.

As Libya's longest serving prisoner, he now serves on the National Transitional Council and represents political prisoners. He still wears the symbol of the royal family on his ring but calls himself a republican and sees no place for his family to rule Libya again. "A republic is better, because people want to share authority and not have it invested in one family or one person," he said in one interview.

« If you believe in your cause, you can get through anything »

Ahmed EL Senussi

Asmaa Mahfouz

It's a simple video: a young, veiled woman looking straight into the camera. Her voice is forceful but not loud or threatening, there is no music and no battle cry - four and half minutes of straight talk, no cuts, no fancy editing.



But Asmaa Mahfouz' call to join the small group of protesters and stand up to oppression was strong. Her video and posts on Twitter and Facebook helped motivate thousands to descend into Cairo's Tahrir Square in February 2011 and call for freedom and human rights. She later told journalists that she received death threats after her video became popular. But that hasn't stopped her. In August, she was arrested for "insulting the ruling Supreme Council of the Armed Forces" which has controlled Egypt since Hosni Mubarak's fall. She was released on bail after country-wide protests.

Asmaa Mahfouz is a symbol of the power of committed individuals to influence their society and topple undemocratic government. Born in 1985, she studied economics at Cairo University and later worked for a computer company.

In 2008 she joined the Egyptian April 6th Youth Movement, a group of young Egyptian activists that started a Facebook page and used blogs and Twitter posts to support a strike planned for 6 April, 2008, in the industrial city of El-Mahalla el-Kobra. In a matter of weeks the page attracted 70,000 members.

The strike ended in violent clashes between workers and police and a crackdown on Internet activists. But the group had shown the value of Facebook and other social media sites as a tool for protest. In the spring of 2011, Asmaa Mahfouz' powerful video rallied the masses...and the rest is history.

« Never say there is no hope. Hope only disappears when you say there is no hope »

Asmaa Mahfouz

Three finalists for Sakharov Prize 2011: honouring human rights activists

Five activists from the Arab world, Dzmitry Bandarenka and the San José de Apartadó Peace Community are the three shortlisted finalists for the 2011 Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought. The winner will be announced on 27 October and will receive €50,000. The award ceremony will take place 14 December in Strasbourg.

Five nominees represent the **Arab spring**, the popular uprising that started in Tunisia in the beginning of 2011 and spread across North Africa and the Middle East. The group's nomination is a sign of respect for all those who have risked their lives fighting for democracy, fundamental rights and dignity.

The nominees are the deceased **Mohamed Bouazizi** from Tunisia, who set himself on fire, triggering a chain of uprisings. **Asmaa Mahfouz** represents the Egyptian struggle on Tahrir Square. **Ahmed EL Senussi** is from Libya, the latest country to free itself from decades of dictatorship. **Razan Zaitouneh** and **Ali Ferzat**, are from Syria - they stand for the ongoing fight of the Syrian people. They nominees were jointly put forward by the EPP, S&D, ALDE and Green groups.

Dzmitry Bandarenka is a Belarusian civil activist and member of the Belarusian Association of Journalists. He is one of the co-founders of the Charter '97 civil rights initiative and coordinator of the European Belarus civil campaign that wants Belarus to join the EU. He was nominated by the ECR group.

The **San José de Apartadó Peace Community** is a Colombian community of "campesinos" - peasant farmers. They have become an internationally recognized symbol of courage, resilience and dedication to the values of peace and justice. In a country plagued by decades of civil war and conflict, this community rejects affiliation to any of the armed groups and demands freedom and liberty for normal people. The community was nominated by the GUE/NGL group.

The Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought, named in honour of the Soviet physicist and political dissident Andrei Sakharov, has been awarded by the European Parliament every year since 1988 to individuals or organisations that have made an important contribution to the fight for human rights or democracy.

Nominations for 2011 Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought

- 5 nominations
 - short list decided by 20 October
 - Prize to be awarded 14 December
-

Among this year's five nominees for one of the world's most prestigious human rights awards is the Arab Spring movement, represented by activists from Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Syria. Other nominees include Palestinian doctor and peace activist Izzeldin Abuelaish, Belarusian journalist Dzimistry Bandarenko, writer and concentration camp survivor Boris Pahor and a community of Colombian peasants dedicated to peace and reconciliation. In alphabetical order they are:

Izzeldin Abuelaish: a Palestinian doctor and founder of the Daughters for Life Foundation is nominated by members of the European Conservatives and Reformists group (ECR). He has dedicated his life to peace in the conflict between Israel and Palestine. He is referred to as a "magical, secret bridge" between the two peoples.

Arab Spring: nominated by four EP political groups in Parliament (EPP, S&D, ALDE, Greens) is represented by activists from across the Arab world. In the nomination statement, members write:

"The 'Arab Spring' is a symbol for all those willing dignity, democracy and fundamental rights in the Arab world. The award of the Sakharov Prize to the five nominees - Mohamed Bouazizi (Tunisia), Asmaa Mahfouz (Egypt), Ahmed EL Senussi (Libya), and Razan Zeitouneh and Ali Ferzat (Syria) - who contribute to radical political changes in their respective countries would reaffirm the Parliament's solidarity and firm support for their struggle for freedom, democracy and the end of authoritarian regimes."

Dzimistry Bandarenka: nominated by members of the ECR group, Bandarenko is a Belarusian civil activist and member of the Belarusian Association of Journalists. He is one of the co-founders of the Charter'97 civil initiative for democratic change and co-ordinator of the European Belarus civil campaign that Belarus to join the EU.

Boris Pahor: a Slovene writer from Italy, he is known as a fighter for freedom of thought and a strong opponent of totalitarian regimes. He first gained prominence writing about his time in Nazi concentration camps. Writing in Slovene but living in his native town of Trieste, he is an advocate of minority rights and minority languages. Pahor was nominated by Milan Zver (EPP, Slovenia) and 51 other MEPs.

The San José de Apartadó Peace Community: nomination is supported by the Group of the European United Left - Nordic Green Left. They say: this "Colombian community of 'campesinos', peasant farmers, has become an internationally recognized symbol of courage, resilience and dedication to the high values of peace and justice, in an environment of brutality and destruction." In a country plagued by decades of civil war and conflict, this community rejects affiliation to any of the armed groups and demands freedom and liberty for normal people.

About the prize

The Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought is named in honour of the Soviet physicist and political dissident Andrei Sakharov. It has been awarded annually by the European Parliament since 1988 to individuals or organisations that have made an important contribution to the fight for human rights or democracy.

Former winners

Cuban dissident Guillermo Fariñas, last year's laureate, has been on hunger strike over several years to protest against censorship in Cuba. He ended his latest hunger strike in July 2011 after Cuban officials agreed to free political prisoners.

Former laureates include Nobel Prize laureates Nelson Mandela (1988), Aung Sang Suu Kyi (1990) and the UN, represented by Secretary General Kofi Annan (2003).

What's next

The winner will receive €50,000. Nominations come from a political group or at least 40 MEPs.

The short list of three finalists was decided 20 October and the group leaders will choose this year's laureate on 27 October.. The prize will be awarded 14 December during a ceremony at the European Parliament in Strasbourg.

Interview with last year's winner: Guillermo Fariñas

The quiet determination of Guillermo Fariñas was evident in an interview conducted by phone. He was prevented from coming to Strasbourg to receive the Parliament's Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought by the Cuban authorities. Instead, a symbolic empty chair marked the spot. He spoke to us of his resolve to oppose Cuba's government regardless of the personal sacrifice that may involve. He also urged the EU to hold firm and take a tough stand against the regime. Mr Fariñas spoke of his unwillingness to seek exile in Spain as his "battle" for freedom lies in Cuba.

How do you feel about being awarded the Sakharov Prize and following in the footsteps of Nelson Mandela and Aung San Suu Kyi?

I feel very committed, especially about my country and my fatherland. I feel a great responsibility in receiving this prize.

Why did you choose the hunger strike as a tool of protest?

I turn to this method only if I have no other choice, because my health has deteriorated badly. I have a thrombosis on the left side of my body, so if I am forced to go on hunger strike, I will have little chance of surviving. Nevertheless if the regime's repression brings me to an unbearable situation, it doesn't leave me much choice but to die with the most dignity possible.

Do you think the EU should change its policy towards Cuba?

No, but I believe that the EU should toughen its policy. In particular, it should maintain its common position and not negotiate with a government that has already betrayed it. Remember that in the past it made commitments to the EU, before it received economic help from Venezuela, and began to improve human rights.

Then, just as Chavez's regime emerged, the Cuban government left negotiations with the EU and held to its autocratic position. I think that the EU should not fall into the same trap again and listen to the siren song of the Cuban government that they need time to change, but look for a series of objectives and say: "if you don't keep your promises, we will not negotiate with you".

You are the third Cuban to receive the Sakharov Prize in the past eight years. Do you think the previous awards changed the political situation in Cuba?

I think so. I believe that in the case of Oswaldo Payá, it forced the government to acknowledge that they did not respect their own laws or the Constitution. It was very important because, until that moment, this had never happened publicly. This showed the world that the Cuban government does not even obey its own laws, not to mention international law.

Regarding the other winner, "Ladies in White", the situation changed because after the wave of repression in 2003, the dissident movement was paralysed, especially the peaceful actions taking place in the street, so the Ladies in White established a pattern with their pain. Therefore, I think those were very important awards because they revived and reactivated the opposition movement, which with one blow, in three days, had been reduced to immobility. Ladies in White laid the foundation so that despite the injustices, despite threats, despite the exiles, people were no longer afraid.

What does the Sakharov Prize mean for you?

The main significance of this award is that for the first time the Cuban government, despite its manoeuvres to get the support of the Spanish government - and to some extent - the Holy See, was forced to cede on a humanitarian basis to internal factors, something that had never occurred before. The government always tries to show that its conflicts do not have anything to do with its own people, but with other countries or blocs. In this case, the imminence of my own death, and the international condemnation of Orlando Zapata's death, put the government in a very difficult position. Then, a fairly credible mediator such as the Catholic Church had to come and try to soften the discredit towards the Cuban state.

Why did you reject the option of exile in Spain?

I won't go to Spain or anywhere else. I do not aspire to be exiled under any circumstances. I respect all my brothers who decide to follow this path, but I believe that we have to battle here. God willing, I will stay alive; God willing, I will not be killed by the minions of the Castro dictatorship. But I think we have to battle here, since - speaking in military terms - the main hub is here, in Cuba.

There was an empty seat in the Nobel Peace Prize ceremony and now for the Sakharov Prize. How do you rate this?

Focus

We agree on having an empty chair, but that seat should bear a Cuban flag. I would like to send a message to all EU citizens who are represented in the EP: never stop watching and caring about the Cuban situation, because each day there are more signs of social explosion, even between Cubans who are not formally involved with the opposition movements. At any time, the Cuban government, made arrogant by 52 years of absolutism, is capable of slaughtering my compatriots and the EP and those it represents must stand ready to condemn and take action.

Andrei Sakharov - the man behind the prize

By the time of his death in the Moscow winter 20 years ago, Andrei Sakharov had built an international reputation as a nuclear physicist, human rights activist and Nobel Peace Prize winner. His fears over the implications of his work led him to call for peaceful coexistence and later for human rights in the USSR. This led the European Parliament to found a human rights prize in his honour. In his 1968 essay on peace he wrote that "intellectual freedom is essential to human society".

Andrei Sakharov: A life in dates

1921: Born in Moscow on 21 May, his father was a physics teacher.

1942-47: Graduates with distinction in physics, awarded a PhD

1948: Included in a group of prominent Soviet scientists whose job was to develop the atomic then hydrogen bomb.

Late 1950's: Sakharov becomes concerned about the moral implications of his work. Steadily becomes an advocate against international nuclear proliferation and supports the 1963 partial test ban treaty.

1967-68: The turning point in Sakharov's life. In 1967 he writes to the Soviet leadership to urge them to accept US proposals for a rejection of anti-missile defence as he believes it will lead to an arms race and a greater risk of war. His pleas are ignored and the following year he puts these fears in an essay "Reflections on Progress, Peaceful Coexistence and Intellectual Freedom" in which he wrote: "Freedom of thought is the only guarantee of the feasibility of a scientific democratic approach to politics, economics and culture".

The essay's underground distribution and publication abroad turn him into a dissident: "I was removed from top secret work and 'relieved' of my privileges in the Soviet 'Nomenclatura,'" Sakharov recalled later.

1970: Helps found the Moscow Human Rights Committee.

1975: Awarded the Nobel Peace Prize - his wife Elena Bonner makes the acceptance speech.

1979-80: Criticism of Soviet invasion of Afghanistan earns him and his wife internal exile in the closed city of Nizhny Novgorod until 1985.

1986: Released from house exile by Mikhail Gorbachev under Glasnost and Perestroika.

1988: European Parliament founds a human rights prize in his honour.

1989: March: elected to the new Soviet Parliament, the All-Union Congress of People's Deputies.

December 1989: Dies of a heart attack in his apartment.

Building on the Sakharov Legacy - the EP and human rights

In Europe and the wider world, the European Parliament advocates respect for basic human rights, freedom and democracy. Parliament's Committee on Foreign Affairs, with its Subcommittee on Human Rights, directly addresses the issue of the defence of human rights outside the Union.

Each year the EP's Sakharov prize is awarded to individuals or international organisations who – like Sakharov – have distinguished themselves in the struggle for human rights.

Parliament and human rights

- The EP publishes an annual report on human rights around the world and fundamental rights within the EU
- At each monthly sitting, human rights abuses are debated on Thursday afternoon
- Members monitor international elections

Hauwa Ibrahim: we are seeing a new world order

Nigerian lawyer Hauwa Ibrahim has devoted herself to the cause of human rights for women in Nigeria and has saved lives fighting the penalties imposed by some courts under Islamic Sharia law - such as stoning to death for adultery. She was awarded the Sakharov Prize in 2005 and was in Parliament for a human rights conference 23 November. She took some time out to talk to us.

What is your greatest success in defending those condemned under Sharia law?

Showing that Sharia courts can respect the dignity of human beings and that the judges can show the milk of human kindness in freeing victims and discharging them on appeal. It shows that whatever system of law we adopt there is hope. And I can see hope in Sharia because there have been solutions and justice. Is this the end of the story? No. There is so much left to be done.

Did receiving the Sakharov Prize help?

Absolutely. It puts you on a global stage. It gives you visibility. With visibility comes credibility. With credibility comes responsibility. All that adds up to helping me articulate more. After receiving the Sakharov Prize I decided to reflect on my practice as a lawyer in the Sharia courts and wrote a book that has been published by the American Bar Association with the support of Lawyers Without Borders in France and Canada. So I think overall Sakharov Prize has been an amazing opening for the greater good of the public.

How could the Sakharov network help your fight for human rights?

The Sakharov Network has been sort of an ongoing process. People who have done different things in our field are coming together to compare notes and share thoughts about how we can enhance our work with real people on real issues in real time.

This year the Sakharov Prize went to five Arab Spring activists. Are we witnessing a lasting democratic change or is it just an episode?

I think we are seeing a new world order that is redefining spaces and who and what should occupy those spaces. I could see three fundamental things occupying those spaces: firstly, the space is for all of us; secondly the space is shared fairly and equitably, it's not just for a group for people who are powerful, rich or greedy; thirdly, freedom springing from inside of the people. How do you take charge of being who you are, you just want to be you, to contribute to what is right for the future of the generation yet unborn. Ultimately I hope we get security to balance the entire question and everybody will have a setting in that space.

It's a process. We hope it will last, but as we see in Egypt now it's re-enacting itself in a different way. It took 40-50 years to get to this stage. It won't take just 40-50 months to clear it, it will take longer. It's easier to destroy than to build. I hope over time it will last.

Alexander Milinkevich: all nations deserve freedom

Human rights activist Alexander Milinkevich won the Sakharov Prize in 2006 when he ran as a candidate against Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko, considered by many as Europe's last dictator. Lukashenko won, but was heavily criticised for rigging the elections. Since then, Milinkevich has been arrested under various pretexts, but has never stopped fighting for freedom and democracy.

You have been active in Belarus for many years. What was your greatest success?

When I began to participate in elections in 2006, there were many highly-placed people in Europe who said we should unite our country with Russia in order to resolve the problem of Lukashenko. After the elections, tens of thousands of people protested publicly despite the threat of being considered as terrorists - and in our country that could mean a death sentence. Everyone has understood that people want to live in an independent and democratic country. For me that's a success.

Did receiving the Sakharov Prize help?

Only we can change things from within to make our country democratic and free. But, the solidarity shown by European leaders is very important. The more support we get from the EP and EU leaders the less easy it is for a dictator to continue his repression.

How can the Sakharov network help your fight for human rights?

We are far from each other and the situations in our countries are very different but I believe that the network can provide benefits. For instance, we make common statements; that's a start but we lack collective action and that's something we should work on.

This year, five Arab Spring activists won the Sakharov Prize. Do you think we are witnessing a lasting democratic transition or will this remain but an episode?

There are still people who think that some countries, some people are not yet ready for democracy. They think a dictator at the head of a country is normal. I believe that every nation, every man and woman wants to be free, because they are born free. That's what the people of North Africa have shown, that all nations deserve freedom.

If the EU wants to change the world it must work on human rights. Don't imagine that a dictatorship is a guarantee of stability. Only democracy can ensure stability.