

## **30 years of Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought**

*European Parliament*

*Brussels, Belgium, 4 June 2018*

Excellencies, Sakharov prize laureates, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, it is an honour to celebrate the **30th anniversary of the Sakharov prize in such fine company.**

I bring you warm greetings from the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and his personal appreciation for the decades of recognition of principled courage that this important award has provided to those who today truly are a threatened species Human Rights Defenders.

Our warm thanks to the **European Union** for your ongoing work in affirmation of human rights universal, indivisible, interdependent. I am delighted to speak alongside EU Special Representative on Human Rights Stavros Lambrinidis and, if I may, highlight too our appreciation for the **“Good Human Rights Stories” initiative** that he is promoting. As indeed we are grateful for the initiative of the External Action Service, DEVCO and DG Justice to profile human rights defenders around the world.

The focus of the Sakharov Prize, of course, is just that: to shine a light of celebration on **human rights defenders**, globally and locally. That theirs is essential life-saving, life-dignifying work may be measured in a variety of ways, of course. But no metric is more baldly revealing of their contribution and the power of it than the brutal force, pernicious persecution and ruthless repression

under which, in so many places, aided by so many regimes, so many defenders of human rights work today. If HRDs' voices don't matter? If their activism doesn't make a difference? If their courage counts for nothing, then why do those who hold just so much power seek just so definitively, so cruelly, their silence?

Excellencies, friends,

This year we mark the **20<sup>th</sup>** anniversary of the Human Rights Defenders declaration, the **25<sup>th</sup>** anniversary of the Vienna Declaration that established the High Commissioner for Human rights; the **30<sup>th</sup>** anniversary of the Sakharov Prize and the **70<sup>th</sup>** anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

At the turning of time, at critical intervals, it is our practice as a human community to recall – through ritual and liturgy – the gifts of our fore-parents, to reflect on what their legacy, on what has since passed and to consider what may lie ahead.

Tough as rights standards are at times to uphold, inconvenient as they are to unaccountable power and while under pressure they remain, nonetheless we must admit that they endure. Their gift persists. For rooted they are, deep in this fundamental proposition to which explicit opposition is inconceivable – that born we all are – equal in dignity and rights.

Conceived in Holocaust – a child of two world wars – born from unfulfilled longing centuries old and of cultures down the ages – forged neither in privilege nor in prosperity, but amidst rather, the wrack, rubble and ruin of reckless rancour, the adoption in 1948 of the UDHR gifted us an enduring encapsulation of

what makes for a legitimate, humanizing relationship between power and relative powerlessness.

Politicized fictions tempt us to believe otherwise, but this Declaration was not the “mere” impost of white, liberal neo-colonialism. In fact, its negotiators were drawn from across the world, meeting 81 times over 168 resolutions.

The West was among the more reluctant drafters, while much of the Declaration’s content came under pressure from newly de-colonized states.

Latin American states were the strongest promoters of social and economic rights; the Soviet Union concentrated on race discrimination, while the US Chair of the drafting group - Eleanor Roosevelt - had little to do with actual wording.

India and Pakistan argued persuasively for equal pay, equal distribution of property, and equal application of marriage laws - specifically against child marriage. And, it was a member of India’s Constituent Assembly, Hansa Mehta, who ensured the gender inclusiveness of the first Article, arguing successfully that instead of the proposed “all men are born equal”, it must and it does read ‘All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.’

As the Chilean drafter observed, adoption of the UDHR was “... a truly significant historic event in which a consensus had been reached as to the **supreme value of the human person**, a value that does not originate in the decision of a worldly power, but rather in the **fact of existing** - which gives rise to the inalienable right to live free from want and oppression and to fully develop one's **personality**.”

The **supreme value of each and every personalized human person!**

This 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the UDHR is once again a time to recall these facts of its genesis story. Those facts should disturb even further, our concern at the very contemporary betrayals of peoples' humanising rights.

Betrayals? Around the world, in pattern and trend, we are witnessing suppression of those rights – of free expression through policies aimed at destroying dissenting voices, by attacks against public scrutiny, manipulation of public opinion and electoral polls.

Unchecked power seeks its malevolent benefit by interference with the independence of the media, the judiciary, the police, the parliaments; twisting and distorting these nation-building tools and methodologies into wicked weapons to prevent them.

... So that: defenders of women's rights, of rights for LGBTQI people, of land rights for indigenous peoples, of rights of minorities; so that such defenders are met with arbitrary arrest, incommunicado detention, subjected to ill-treatment and torture, are disappeared, even assassinated.

So that governments' unchecked powers may further inflate under wind of nationalists' false, fictional claims about mono-racial origins and sovereign separatism; so that as populists whip up firestorms of hatred and violence against minority communities authorities' reach expands; so that the rule of law and principles of public accountability can shrink as journalists, lawyers and judges who strive to work with integrity, and independence, are dismissed, arrested – or worse.

Today, the work of brave civil society activists standing up for people's rights is obstructed by abusive regulation, by smear campaigns; hamstrung by impossible administrative regulations or threat of exorbitant fines, and by misuse of the judicial system to coerce them. Into silence

In some European member states, senior political figures and mass media outlets have launched scathing attacks on defenders – and on the judiciary when decisions and rulings by both national courts and the European Court of Human Rights are perceived to go against certain interests – perhaps their own personal interests, as the case may be.

Such attacks are also attacks on the **democratic systems based on the rule of law and checks and balances** which the EU itself was created to foster. In this there is no north or south, nor east or west – there is only the *humane* and the *inhumane*.

The so-called *Copenhagen Criteria* require that countries seeking admission to the EU have stable institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities. **How the EU deals with member countries that backslide on human rights once they have joined the Union** is a matter for serious further consideration, particularly in light of the **Sofia Declaration of May 2018**, in which the EU and its Western Balkans partners also recognized that civil society and independent media play crucial roles in the process of democratisation.

Excellencies, friends,

The freedom of thought that the Sakharov prize celebrates is a humanising, dignifying force through whose expression each of us emerges as more fully human: active, engaged, wilful, clamorous.

To that end, we, the UN, the EU institutions, can and must do more; more to support human rights defence in troubled times:

- In February this year, the EU reaffirmed its support for the independence and work of the High Commissioner and the Office, and for active engagement in UN human rights fora. We need more of that support.
- The EU's next Multi-Annual Financial Framework Post-2020 can be a force for positive change, provided comprehensive attention is given to **human rights**. We need more of that change.
- Were the EU to designate a **Special Representative on Civil Society, that mandate** could serve as an advocate for civil society and ensure a better coherence between EU external and internal action. We need more of that advocacy.
- In terms of establishing strong internal - external coherence – the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights' strong **support for civil society in the area of human rights, fundamental freedoms and democracy** can be even further strengthened – and perhaps replicated within the EU. We need more of that coherence.

To do more takes courage but be assured there is courage to be taken. For on this the **70th anniversary** of the **Universal Declaration for Human Rights** at least, let's be very clear that even in the darkest cells of the cruellest prison; in the midst of resource depleted refugee camps; in fragile settlements, perched high on remote mountain tops; shuffling along barely shoulder-wide alley ways of sprawling slums; littered among street workers and market stall owners; heard in the mutterings of farm labourers, the chanting of indigenous people and in the calls of student protestors - although at times only a sputtering , flickering flame; while often overshadowed by coercive State power; and even in the absence of well-intentioned, measurable interventions of global elites, still you will find there and everywhere - always - those who do not lie down; who will not be silenced, those who do stand up bravely for their rights, in defence too of ours.

Such standing up is older than history. There is no present political posture or pragmatic that can rightly deprive us of that gift or deny us its exercise.

Well may we stand in horror at how power abuses powerlessness. But let us stand as firmly in awe of how human rights defenders, in their relative power, use their voice to call us forwards into an braver more inclusive and just humanity:

Human rights defenders? Empower them. Support them. Celebrate them. Honour them. Join them. Be them.

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