

25th ANNIVERSARY CONFERENCE REPORT

The Sakharov Prize Network celebrates 25 years of the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought

An unprecedented 22 Sakharov Prize Laureates gathered at the European Parliament in Strasbourg together with President Martin Schulz and Members of the European Parliament from 17-21 November 2013 to mark 25 years of defending human rights, symbolised by the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought, Europe's most prestigious award for human rights defenders awarded yearly by the European Parliament.

The 25th Anniversary Conference of the Sakharov Prize brought together Sakharov Prize Laureates from Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America and the Middle East , as well as Members of the European Parliament and other representatives of EU and other European institutions, services and agencies, NGOs, international organisations, journalists and students. Participants took an active part in a variety of debates and seminars relating to the Sakharov Prize Network and the European Union's role in promoting and protecting human rights worldwide.

The centrepiece of the Sakharov Conference was the award of the 2013 Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought to Malala Yousafzai, the first child ever to be awarded the Sakharov Prize. All Sakharov Prize Laureates present for the Conference were present in a plenary session of the European Parliament where Malala was honoured by a standing ovation by the Europe Union's over 700 elected representatives, on 20 November 2013, Universal Children's Day.

The Sakharov Prize Network's pledge to human rights

The three days of Conference debates culminated in the launch by the European Parliament's Sakharov Prize Network of a Declaration on the purpose of the Network and the action it pledges to undertake in favour of human rights.

The Declaration emphasises the need for solidarity and coordination among the defenders of human rights. All members of the Network are called upon to act as a global human rights violations alert system. The EU is urged to make a substantial diplomatic commitment to the Network's Members through its representations worldwide in particular for the protection of Sakharov Prize Laureates and human rights defenders at risk

Members of the Network pledge their support to international campaigns to promote fundamental rights, in cooperation with civil society and international organisations, including the campaign to end violence against children and promote child education.

The Network commits itself to provide a Sakharov Prize Scholarship in Human Rights to enhance the awareness of international human rights standards and will consider the establishment of a Sakharov Prize Shelter initiative providing temporary shelter for human rights defenders.

The Sakharov Prize Network called on the Iranian authorities for a full pardon for Sakharov Prize Laureates Nasrin Sotoudeh and Jafar Panahi and on the Chinese authorities to stop the frequent restrictions imposed on Sakharov Prize Laureate Hu Jia. It expressed its strong concern for and solidarity with the Syrian people and Sakharov Prize Laureate Razan Zaitouneh in Damascus.

The Network condemned all actions against other Sakharov Prize Laureates which can be qualified as a breach of human rights and called for an inquiry into the death of Sakharov Prize Laureate 2002 Oswaldo Payá.

The Sakharov Prize Network's purpose and action

Regarding the Sakharov Prize Network itself, the Laureates emphasised that the establishment of the Network had been a positive step, and there was praise for the unity and dynamism of those involved. Wei Jingsheng, the 1996 Laureate, told the conference that his receiving the Sakharov Prize had inspired other Chinese activists to continue their struggle for human rights. Others, such as Olivier Basille of 2005 Laureates Reporters Without Borders, said that recognition from the European Parliament had given their organisations a degree of legitimacy, thus enabling them to make their voices heard on an international level.

However, the Laureates made it clear that they do not believe the Network is reaching its full potential as a support mechanism for human rights defenders. Mr Basille and other Laureates expressed concern that a lack of concrete action following the award of the Sakharov Prize risks turning the Prize into a cosmetic exercise. This inaction, he argued, is most noticeable in relation to those Laureates who have been imprisoned or whose movement is otherwise restricted.

The Laureates offered numerous innovative proposals for ways to make the Network a more powerful resource. The idea of a Sakharov passport or a Sakharov visa, which would allow Laureates greater freedom of movement, put forward by Olivier Basille and Frontline Defenders' Vincent Forest, was enthusiastically received. There were also requests for the creation of more informal opportunities for continued communication among Laureates. This prompted Berta Soler to ask that the Network assist the Cuban laureates in overcoming the lack of internet access in their country.

The EU's engagement on human rights

As well as discussing the yet-to-be-realised potential of the Sakharov Prize Network, the Laureates gave their views on how the EU as a whole can better support human rights defenders worldwide.



18-11-2013: The EU's Support of Sakharov Prize Laureates and human rights defenders worldwide was discussed with EU Special Representative for Human Rights Stavros Lambrinidis

There was a broad consensus among Laureates that the EU and its member states must adopt a stronger stance on states that violate human rights. In particular, participants including Wei Jingsheng and Shirin Ebadi called for more effective measures to block known human rights violators from travelling to the EU or holding financial assets in member states - a proposal which was supported by Vice-President McMillan-Scott. Mr Wei, along with Salima Ghezali, expressed concern that focussing on trade or security prevents the international community from more strongly condemning the human rights records of certain states, and urged the EU to place human rights at the top of its diplomatic agenda.

The Laureates were also in agreement on the EU's responsibility to take stronger action when human rights defenders, especially Sakharov Prize Laureates, are imprisoned. Laureates feel that the EU's political weight, combined with its network of ambassadors, delegations and Special Representatives, has the potential for swift and effective action to ensure the safety and timely release of imprisoned activists.

The various representatives of EU institutions present welcomed the Laureates' views, and outlined their individual and collective strategies on human rights. In a debate focusing on the European Parliament's engagement in human rights, Elmar Brok, Chair of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, emphasised the need for the Parliament to use every tool at its disposal to push for progress on human rights, making specific reference to EU trade policy as a means of exerting pressure on states to uphold their human rights obligations. Barbara Lochbihler, Chair of the Subcommittee on Human Rights, spoke of the Parliament's efforts to coordinate its work with other actors in the field of human rights, including global organisations such as the UN, but also other EU institutions.

Eduard Kukan, the 2013 Rapporteur on the EP's Annual Report on Human Rights, pointed to the 2013 report's focus on countries in transition and what comes after the transition, stating that whilst "the EU does not have a universal recipe in making things right, we do have experience".

The EU's need of collective action was echoed by her colleagues from other EU bodies. Stavros Lambrinidis, the EU Special Representative for Human Rights, in a dynamic roundtable with Laureates spoke of the necessity of inter-institutional coherence in forming a united front in defence of human rights. Mr Lambrinidis also stated that promoting human rights forms an essential part of EU foreign policy. He made it clear that trade and security, though vital, cannot be the only considerations in the EU's external relations, particularly in dealing with countries where human rights abuses are being committed.

Morten Kjaerum, Director of the EU Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA), highlighted the progress of legislation against discrimination and in favour of victims being adopted by the EU Member States, a process not without difficulty. "Initially human rights were addressed in the EU as something that happened in far-away countries. It got a lot more complicated for the EU when it adopted human rights into its own internal agenda. Racism is still racism in the EU".

Jean-Louis Ville, Head of the Governance, Democracy and Human Rights Unit of the European Commission's Directorate General for Development and Cooperation (DEVCO) outlining the means of support by the EU open to Laureates and human rights defenders around the world through the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights, with its global reach, and its ability to coordinate effectively with organisations on the ground in countries where human rights abuses occur, and its flexibility. "It is difficult to fund NGOs when countries force them to register in a deliberate attempt to repress them: we have to be flexible and clever in funding. When requested by NGOs, we go underground, though it is also important to keep our public face".

The European Court of Human Rights and the Council of Europe

A highlight of the Conference was the visit to the European Court of Human Rights, where the Laureates were welcomed by President Dean Spielmann and discussed with Judges Angelika Nussberger and André Potocki. Both President Spielmann and the Deputy Registrar of the Court Michael O'Boyle spoke of the importance of coordination between the Court - which is the implementing body of the Council of Europe's European Convention on Human Rights - and other actors in human rights, including institutions such as the EU and human rights defenders themselves.

During these meetings, discussions were centred on international justice as a means of ending impunity for violators of human rights.

The Council of Europe was represented at the Conference by Isil Gachet, Director of the Office of the Council of Europe's Commissioner for Human Rights. Ms Gachet described the role of the Commissioner, a post held in 2013 by Nils Muznieks, as based on three pillars: "independence", "impartiality" and "non-judicial". Ms Gachet explained how the Council aims to combat impunity through observation and reporting of human rights violations, and emphasised the "complementarity" between the Council and the European Court of Human Rights in protecting fundamental freedoms.

Protecting children's rights

The Conference was concluded on 20 November with high-level segment of the Conference hosted by President Schulz and Strasbourg's Senator-Mayor Roland Ries. Held on Universal Children's Day, the conference conclusion marked a year since the EU dedicated the Nobel Prize it was awarded in 2012 to its Children of Peace initiative, helping children in war and emergency situations around the world.

The event, opened by President Schulz, who emphasised the need to defend children's rights and support children's education in his welcoming speech, featured European Commissioner for Humanitarian Aid Kristalina Georgieva, EU Special Representative for Human Rights Stavros Lambrinidis, Unicef Deputy Executive Director Yoka Brandt and the Norwegian Refugee Council's Secretary General Jan Egeland.

Commissioner Georgieva made an impassioned plea for continued support to the EU Children of Peace initiative that is currently providing educational and psychological support to children displaced and traumatised by war and conflict in Syria, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Colombia, Ecuador and Pakistan, whilst stating that she felt humbled "to be among so many champions of humanity" referring to the Sakharov Prize Laureates, who, in turn, highlighted the needs of children in their countries and regions, particularly in the Middle East, Iran and Cuba.

Discussions on children's rights during the Conference highlighted also a number of positive developments in the field.

Barbara Lochbihler, Chair of the European Parliament's Subcommittee on Human Rights, evaluated the EU's guidelines on preventing suffering among children in conflict as another step in the right direction. Philippe Cori, Director of Unicef's EU Office highlighted the achievement of the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child, which, deemed an impossible and even an unnecessary dream when first thought up by UN officials including him, is now the most ratified UN human rights Convention with 193 states parties, and has brought about a shift of perception of children, from people with needs to people with rights.

Among the most pressing issues raised by the Laureates were the detention and even execution of minors, child victims of human trafficking, sexual violence against children, and the denial of basic rights such as healthcare and education.

It was also pointed out that children still tend to bear the worst consequences of armed conflict, and Laureates such as Sudan's Salih Osman implored the international community to strengthen its efforts to protect children from the devastating impact of war.

In addition, Zeng Jinyang, Sakharov Prize nominee and wife of 2008 Laureate Hu Jia, who represented him at the Conference, and Berta Soler of the Damas de Blanco raised concerns about persecution of the children of human rights defenders.

On what more can be done to improve the situation of children worldwide, the Laureates were unanimous in their message: an end to the impunity for those who violate children's rights. Should it fail to end this impunity, argued 2001 Laureate Nurit Peled-Elhanan, the international community risks committing "the crime of silence".



19-11-2013: Sakharov Prize Laureates and MEPs support the #endviolence campaign by Unicef to end violence against children worldwide.

In order to hold states properly accountable for violations of children's rights, the Laureates emphasised the need for those who seek to protect children to present a united, coordinated front. Rosa María Payá, daughter of 2002 Laureate Oswaldo Payá, and Shirin Ebadi, representing 2012 Laureate Nasrin Sotoudeh, urged organisations such as Unicef to improve their cooperation with civil society groups in certain countries. 1999 Sakharov Prize Laureate, former President and current Prime Minister of Timor Leste Xanana Gusmão, injected a note of optimism, stating his belief that young activists like Malala Yousafzai represent hope for a future in which children's rights are respected.

The Members of the Sakharov Prize Network committed themselves to supporting the international campaign to end violence against children and to promote children's education.

The Laureates together with the Vice-President of the European Parliament Edward McMillan-Scott and former Presidents Jerzy Buzek and Hans-Gert Pottering, featured with the Laureates in the photograph above, also expressed their support for the end violence initiative, which aims to create a unified global movement for the protection of children's rights.

CONCLUSION

The Conference was deemed a success by the Sakharov Prize Laureates and the speakers who engaged in a high-level of debate on the many human rights challenges still to be overcome. Moreover, all involved expressed their hope that this event would be a launching pad for renewed action in the Sakharov Prize Network's work in defence of human rights worldwide.

Follow-up work to the Conference is already underway, in the framework provided by the Conference's final declaration.

With the European Parliament's support, on 5-6 December 2013, Berta Soler and Aliaksandr Milinkevich participated in a Sakharov Prize Network event in Vilnius, Lithuania whilst Salih Osman addressed the EU-NGO Forum in Brussels, Belgium.

Ms Soler and Mr Milinkevich discussed with students and NGOs, in a debate moderated by MEP Leonard Donskiss, the relationship between the EU and human rights defenders. Both stressed the need for the active involvement of the international community in shaping relations with the non-democratic regimes. Mr Osman addressed the high-level opening session of the EU-NGO Forum in Brussels on impunity and accountability and advocated better international cooperation with the International Criminal Court, whilst calling for the victims of human rights violations to be better heard by it.

The Network is continuing its cooperation with Unicef on the End Violence Against Children campaign and aims to put its weight behind further international human rights campaigns.

Members of the Network have continued to keep in close contact, with numerous Laureates paying tribute to winner of the first Sakharov Prize in 1988 Nelson Mandela who died on 5 December 2013.