

Alexei Navalny, 2021 Sakharov Prize winner

Alexei Navalny was awarded the European Parliament's 2021 Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought. The award – named in honour of the Soviet physicist and political dissident Andrei Sakharov – was established in 1988 to give recognition to individuals and organisations that defend human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Navalny, Russia's most prominent voice of opposition, known for exposing corruption and being an ardent critic of President Vladimir Putin, died under mysterious circumstances on 16 February 2024 in a remote Arctic penal colony.

Born in 1976, Alexei Navalny was a lawyer, blogger and political activist. He came to international prominence for organising protests against the Russian Government, running for office and pushing for anti-corruption reforms. He was Putin's fiercest critic.

He was arrested in mid-January 2021 when he returned to Russia after recovering from being poisoned with the nerve agent Novichok.

Navalny spent over a month in Berlin's Charité University Hospital between August and September 2020, and was in intensive care for most of that time. Once he had recovered, he tracked down the people he believed had played a role in poisoning him. Pretending to be a security official, he managed to dupe a state agent into admitting that a chemical poison was used. Navalny accused the Russian Government of being responsible for the poisoning, but it denied the allegations.

It was during the second plenary session of October 2021 that the European Parliament announced the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought for 2021 following the earlier decision of the Conference of Presidents and Political groups leaders and declared Alexei Navalny the winner. .

At the announcement, Heidi Hautala, Vice-President of the European Parliament said:

'Alexei Navalny has shown great courage in his attempts to restore the freedom of choice to the Russian people. For many years, he has fought for human rights and fundamental freedoms in his country. This has cost him his freedom and nearly his life. On behalf of the European Parliament, I call for his immediate and unconditional release.'

Following the awards ceremony in December 2021, David Sassoli, who was the European Parliament President at the time, said:

'Today, this Sakharov Prize also means that the European Parliament is firmly calling for Alexei Navalny's immediate and unconditional release.'

These words fell on deaf ears, as did the numerous appeals the EU made to the Russian authorities. Navalny, who was initially being held in the Vladimir Region, east of Moscow, was transferred to Kharp in Siberia in December 2023.

He was found dead on 16 February in the prison where he was being held on a 19-year sentence over charges that were widely considered to be politically motivated. On the 28 February, just 12 days after Navalny's death, his wife Yulia Navalnaya addressed the European Parliament during its plenary session in Strasbourg. She was visibly moved as she said:

'If you really want to defeat Putin, you have to become an innovator, you have to stop being boring. Putin is the leader of an organised criminal gang. You and all of us must fight the criminal gang, and the political innovation here is to apply the methods of fighting organised crime, not political competition; not diplomatic notes, but investigations into the financial machinations; not statements of concern but the search of mafia associates in your countries for discreet lawyers and financiers who are helping Putin and his friends to hide money.'

In the debating chamber, European Parliament President Roberta Metsola said:

'This House and its Members condemn his killing in the strongest possible terms. It is a crime that deserves an international and independent investigation. The world is owed justice.'

In a resolution, the European Parliament strongly condemned the murder of Alexei Navalny and gave its full support to Yulia Navalnaya in her determination to continue his work. Stressing that the people of Russia cannot be confused with the 'warmongering' and 'autocratic' regime of the Kremlin, MEPs expressed their solidarity with all those in Russia and beyond who, despite the brutal repression and the severe personal consequences, continue to find the courage to speak the truth.

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