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Navalny Wins EU's Sakharov Human Rights Award

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Alexei Navalny was imprisoned after he returned to Russia from treatment for a nerve agent poisoning.
Maxim Zmeyev / AFP

The European Parliament on Wednesday awarded jailed Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny its Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought.

The award, named after Soviet dissident Andrei Sakharov, recognizes individuals who have made an "outstanding contribution to protecting freedom of thought," and is "the highest tribute paid by the EU to human rights work."

Navalny is currently serving a two-and-a-half-year jail sentence for breaking a 2014 parole requirement to check in with Russian law enforcement while he was undergoing treatment for nerve agent poisoning in Germany.

The prize was announced Wednesday by the European Parliament Vice President Heidi Hautala. The European People's Party called for the immediate release of Navalny and all other political prisoners.

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Navalny's allies said the Sakharov Prize for human rights awarded to him by the European parliament was a victory for all supporters of "truth."

"The Sakharov Price is, of course, an award for you all. To all the people who are not indifferent, who even in the darkest of times are not afraid to speak the truth," Navalny's FBK anti-corruption foundation said on Twitter.

The Kremlin critic has become Russia's leading opposition figure in recent years, with his blockbuster investigations into alleged corruption of Russia's elites garnering millions of views on YouTube.

While in Germany recovering from the attack with Novichok, investigative outlets Bellingcat and The Insider named officers with Russia's security services as the individuals responsible for the attack on Navalny in the Siberian city of Tomsk.

Most of Navalny's allies have since fled Russia under a wave of repression. His Anti-Corruption Foundation was liquidated by the Moscow City Court earlier this year after authorities named it an "extremist" organization.

Navalny was one of the frontrunners in contention for the Nobel Peace Prize, which eventually went to Russian journalist Dmitry Muratov, editor-in-chief of the independent Novaya Gazeta outlet, and Philippines journalist Maria Ressa.

The Sakharov Prize, set up in 1988 and named after Soviet dissident Andrei Sakharov, is awarded every year to those fighting for human rights or democracy.

Last year's award of the 50,000-euro ($58,000) prize went to the movement opposing President Alexander Lukashenko in Belarus, a close ally of Russian President Vladimir Putin.

The prize will be handed out in a ceremony in a plenary session of the European Parliament in December in Strasbourg.

The other finalists for the prize were a group of Afghan women for their fight for women's rights in Taliban-run Afghanistan, and Jeanine Anez, a former head of state in Bolivia who is jailed on charges of leading a coup in 2019.

AFP contributed reporting.

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