



RUSSIA

A Get-Out-Of-Jail-Alive Certificate? Sakharov Prize Gives Navalny Global Recognition, Protection

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By RFE/RL's Russian Service Current Time

For months, the Kremlin has been trying to convince its citizens and others that opposition leader Aleksei Navalny is just a criminal who ran an extremist organization.

It jailed him in February for 2 1/2 years on a parole violation tied to an old economic crime that he denounces as politically motivated.

Then it liquidated his popular Anti-Corruption Foundation -- which battled graft and challenged the pro-Kremlin United Russia party -- on claims it was an extremist organization.

However, the European Parliament's decision to award the 45-year-old Russian activist the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought -- the bloc's most prestigious human rights award -- undermines the Kremlin's strategy, colleagues and analysts say.

"It's a strong recognition that Aleksei Navalny is not an extremist or terrorist, but is, in fact, a freedom fighter," Alina Polyakova, president and CEO of the Center for European Policy Analysis, tells RFE/RL.

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The prize elevates him to a "global figure versus just being a Russian figure" and some people will "now see him in a totally different light," she says.

Navalny was chosen by European lawmakers on October 20 after being short-listed along with a group of Afghan women and a jailed Bolivian opposition politician.

Previous winners of the award, named after Soviet dissident Andrei Sakharov, include former South African President Nelson Mandela and Malala Yousafzai, a Pakistani campaigner for women's rights and education.

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The Kremlin did not immediately comment on the European Parliament's decision.

Marat Gelman, a Russian activist, tells RFE/RL that the choice of Navalny is probably driving the Kremlin "crazy" but that it would be able to use its dominance of the media to neutralize any impact at home.

"It will not change opinions of Navalny," he says. People who respect Navalny will be pleased, but "people who watch [Russian state] television...will receive one more affirmation that Navalny is a scoundrel, an American agent."

"The balance of forces will not change," Gelman says.

Russian state TV did not immediately report on the award.

Ruslan Shaveddinov, a Navalny associate, says Putin wants "everyone to quickly forget" about the activist.

In announcing the decision to award the prize to Navalny, Heidi Hautula, the vice president of the European Parliament, said the Russian activist had shown "great courage" in challenging the Kremlin's increasing authoritarian rule.

"For many years, he has fought for human rights and fundamental freedoms in [Russia]. This has cost him his freedom, and nearly his life," she said during a speech to the European Parliament.

Navalny, who had been jailed more than 10 times for short stints prior to his February sentencing, nearly died last year after being poisoned with a military-grade nerve agent in an attack he says was carried out by Russia's security services.

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Hautula called on the Russian government to immediately release Navalny.

Colleagues, human rights activists, and analysts say that is very unlikely. However, some say the award could help protect Navalny from harm while he's behind bars.

Russian prisons are notorious for their poor conditions.

“Right now, the most important thing is for him to survive in prison and get out of it. And such a prestigious award, of course, should be a security certificate,” Zoya Svetova, a human rights activist, tells RFE/RL.

Gleb Pavlovsky, a former political adviser to the Kremlin, agrees.

The award "strengthens Navalny's position in prison -- protects him to some degree," he says.

Svetova nonetheless holds out hope for Navalny's early release, pointing out that Ukrainian filmmaker Oleh Sentsov was released by the Kremlin in a prisoner swap with Kyiv about a year after he won the Sakharov Prize in 2018.

Russia arrested Sentsov in 2014 for opposing Moscow's takeover of his native Crimea earlier that year. He was sentenced to 20 years in prison on terrorism charges in a trial criticized by human rights groups and Western governments as politically motivated.

Third Russian Recipient

Navalny is the third recipient of the award to come from Russia since it was launched in 1988.

Anatoly Marchenko, a Siberian-born Soviet dissident, author, and human rights activist -- who spent more than one-third of his life in prison or internal exile -- won the award posthumously in 1988 along with Mandela.

Memorial, the Russian human rights group headed by Sakharov in the late 1980s, won the prize in 2009.

Oleg Orlov, Memorial's chairman, said at the time that the prize represented much-needed moral support during a difficult period for rights activists in Russia.

But pressure on Russian rights groups has only increased exponentially since then. The Kremlin has labeled dozens of organizations, including Memorial, as "foreign agents," a designation that scares away potential donors and starves them of financing.

Many other Russian rights groups have folded under the pressure. While Memorial was threatened with closure in 2014, it has held on. It is unclear what, if any, role the prestige of the Sakharov Prize has played in Memorial's survival.

Polyakova notes that in the late Soviet period the Kremlin didn't make "strong moves" against dissidents or political prisoners who had global recognition so as not to jeopardize certain economic and political relationships deemed "more important than these few individuals."

She says Putin reads from the same script and is prone to use political prisoners to barter for something more valuable. Navalny would be no exception.

"The more Navalny is recognized, the more he is internationally known, the more valuable he becomes to the Kremlin as a sort of hostage, and a bargaining chip for future endeavors and future pursuits," she says.

Written and with additional reporting by Todd Prince in Washington
