News | 14.12.2011

Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought

Five activists from the Arab Spring Awarded

The Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought, named after Soviet scientist and dissident Andrei Sakharov, was established in December 1988 by the European Parliament as a means to honour individuals or organisations who have dedicated their lives to the defence of human rights and freedom of thought. A shortlist of nominees is drawn up by the Foreign Affairs Committee and the Development Committee, with the winner announced in October. As of 2010, the prize is accompanied by a monetary award of €50,000.

Five activists from the Arab Spring will today be awarded the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought by the European Parliament. The vast majority of MEPs voted for these activists sending an important signal of support. The award acknowledges the successes of the movements in the region in the last year and reminds us all also of the big challenges which the people in the Arab states continue to face. The decision is also a call for the EU to question its foreign policy and to highlight the central position that human rights must have.

The Arab Spring would possibly not even have existed had Mohamed Bouazizi not set himself alight as a protest against the daily humiliation he experienced. The Tunisian man, who is honoured posthumously with the Sakharov Prize, is one of the most important persons in this rebellion. Just now, one year after his death and the beginning of the protests against the dictator Zine el Abidine Ben Ali, a human rights defender was voted for president.

The inclusion of the Egyptian blogger Asmaa Mahfouz acknowledges the importance of social networks in the movement. At the same time it puts a spotlight on the new rulers at the Nile River: Journalists and bloggers once again are facing persecution, and the security forces are acting against the opposition.

The sharing of the prize with the three other activists highlights also the ongoing violent situation in the region. Ahmend al-Zubair al-Sanusi, who was imprisoned for more than 30 years, is now pleading in the National Libyan Transitional Council for the development of democratic structures in his land. The Syrian human rights defender Razan Zaitouneh and her compatriot Ali Farzat are fighting against a government, which defends its authority with brutal violence. At least 5000 people have died and 40,000 have been imprisoned, many of whom are facing torture.

The European Union shamefully assisted for too long the authoritarian rulers of Tunisia, Egypt and Libya. Interested only in maintaining good commercial relations and preventing African migrants from crossing

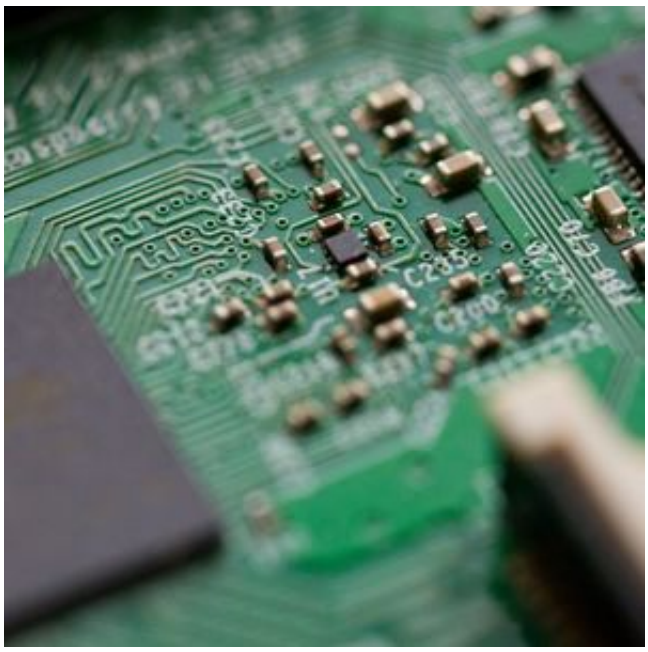
to Europe, the Union accepted the torture of opposition activists and repression of press freedom in these states. European contractors provided the weapons which Ben Ali, Hosni Mubarrak and Muammar al-Gadaffi used against their critics. For these reasons it is of great concern that German armaments industries are allowed to provide Saudi-Arabia with tanks. The EU has to send better signals to the new democratic states. The Union has to help strengthen reforms to empower human rights and reform its policies towards migrants.

With regards to Syria the EU shamefully waited more than half a year before initiating effective sanctions – more than 180 days, in which people died in the streets of Damascus, Daraa and Homs. In this case Europe has to learn from its errors: The Union has to be accessible for refugees, to stop deportations of refugees to Syria and to offer active support to the opposition. Enterprises which are exporting surveillance technology must be stopped as well as others which are involved, like the German Siemens company, in projects with the Syrian regime. If we recognise people like Razan Zaitouneh and Ali Farzat for their struggle against repression and accept at the same time the cooperation with al-Assad for economic interests, we loose all credibility.

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