



# Three candidates shortlisted for the 2021 Václav Havel Human Rights Prize

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**The selection panel of the Václav Havel Human Rights Prize, which rewards outstanding civil society action in the defence of human rights in Europe and beyond, has today announced the shortlist for the 2021 Prize.**

Meeting today in Prague, the panel – made up of independent figures from the world of human rights and chaired by Rik Daems, President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) – decided to shortlist the following three nominees, in alphabetical order:

## **Ms Maria KALESNIKAVA, Belarus**

The nominee is one of the opposition leaders in Belarus and a member of the Coordination Council. She was the head of the campaign headquarters of former presidential nominee Viktor Barbaryka. She is one of the three female symbols of the Belarusian opposition and its people's struggle for civil and political liberties and fundamental rights. The nominee was abducted in Minsk in September 2020 and has been detained since then. She was charged with undermining national security. She tore her passport at the border to prevent being removed from Belarus. The nominee is at serious risk for her safety and life.

## **Reporters Sans Frontières**

The nominee is a leading INGO that safeguards the freedom of expression and information. Since 1985, RSF has provided emergency support to thousands of journalists at risk around the world and obtained the release of several detained journalists. RSF systematically takes steps to ensure investigation and legal proceedings against those responsible of the murder of journalists and supports democracy by rolling back disinformation.

## **Mr Germain RUKUKI, Burundi**

The nominee is a human rights defender who has been campaigning in the human rights field for years (in particular, against torture and the death penalty). Since 2015, human rights defenders and organisations in Burundi have been facing a shrinking space and have been targeted by the authorities. In this context, the nominee was sentenced in 2018 to 32 years in prison in what the international community considered to be a pretext to silence his voice and criminalise his human rights work. Subsequently, a Court of Appeal reduced his sentence to 1 year in 2021 and he was released.

The winner of this 60,000-euro annual Prize will be announced at the opening of the PACE's autumn plenary session on 27 September 2021. An international conference will also be organised in Prague in honour of the 2021 laureate on 29 September.

"I would like to thank all those who put forward nominations for the 2021 Prize," said PACE President Rik Daems. "Fundamental rights and freedoms must be defended and preserved with all necessary strength and vigilance. They can never be taken for granted and it takes a lot of courage and determination to uphold them. The three selected candidates' commitment to the values which were dear to Vaclav Havel and which the Council of Europe stands for deserves our appreciation and recognition".

"In a situation when hundreds of millions of people are concerned primarily about their own health, human rights are jeopardized more than ever and deserve even greater attention. Human rights defenders are the heroes of our times," said Václav Havel Library Executive Director Michael Žantovský.

Since 2013, the Prize has been awarded in turn to Ales Bialiatski (Belarus), Anar Mammadli (Azerbaijan), Ludmilla Alexeeva (Russian Federation), Nadia Murad (Iraq), Murat Arslan (Turkey), Oyub Titiev (Russian Federation) and jointly to Ilham Tohti (China) and the NGO Youth Initiative for Human Rights (YIHR).

Last year, the Prize was awarded to Saudi women's rights activist Loujain Al-Hathloul.

The Václav Havel Human Rights Prize is awarded each year by PACE, in partnership with the Václav Havel Library and the Charta 77 Foundation, and consists of a sum of 60,000 euros, a trophy and a diploma. The ceremony will be followed by the conference in honour of the prizewinner called The Covid Dilemmas: Rights against Responsibilities (with a special event on the human rights crisis in Afghanistan) in Prague on 29 September 2021.

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