



CELEBRATING SAKHAROV

1921-2021

May 13, 2021

Press Release

10th Sakharov International Conference on Peace, Progress and Human Rights

Yesterday, the 10th International Conference "Celebrating the Life of A. Sakharov 1921-2021" took place in Vilnius City Hall. Speakers from the United States, Great Britain, Poland, Russia and Lithuania participated at the conference live and remotely. This was one of the events of the Sakharov Centennial organized by the Andrei Sakharov Research Center for Democratic Development at Vytautas Magnus University.

This one-day conference focused on the 1975 Helsinki Accords, which became the basis for cooperation and security in Europe, and eventually led to the disintegration of the Soviet bloc. The Helsinki Accords were signed in the same year that the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to Andrei Sakharov, whose writings and insights were reflected in the Helsinki Declaration. The conference speakers also discussed the role of dissident groups in opening up a totalitarian society in the East and the challenges facing Europe today.

The conference was opened by Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Mantas Adomėnas, who emphasized the importance of Sakharov's personality for the present and the fact that the challenges he was faced with have not disappeared. "Unfortunately, after thirty years, we are still experiencing violations of freedom, suppression of freedom of speech, restrictions on human rights around the world and in the immediate neighborhood," said M. Adomėnas.

Vilnius Mayor Remigijus Šimašius greeted the participants remotely, wishing them further inspiration, courage to defend their freedom and invited those who watch the conference online to visit the exhibition dedicated to Andrei Sakharov, which will be held until 28 May at Vilnius City Hall.

Andrei Sakharov's granddaughter, a biophysicist and human rights activist, addressed the audience from London, and during her talk discussed events dedicated to the Centennial of Sakharov in other cities around the world, and at the end recalled a personal memory of her grandfather unexpectedly reminiscing about Lithuania: „You know, the forests in Lithuania are so beautiful, they are friendly”. According to Sakharov-Liberman, this observation aptly describes the friendliness and attitude of the Baltic States in defending the most important questions.

The writer and translator Tomas Venclova, one of the founders of the Vilnius Helsinki Group, said: “Sakharov realized early on that the dangers of nuclear war far outweighed the dubious benefits of nuclear balance, and pledged to protect humanity from what he had created. He advocated agreements

Are Peace, Progress and Human Rights Indivisible?

Tenth International Sakharov Conference, May 13, 2021 - Vilnius, Lithuania



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1921-2021

that reduce the likelihood of major military clashes. We have been able to avoid such clashes for many decades, but the chances unfortunately remain fragile."

Professor Michael Morgan of North Carolina, who holds degrees from the Universities of Toronto, Cambridge and Yale, says the Helsinki Accords were a turning point in the Cold War and established common principles of international order on both sides of the Iron Curtain: Europe and North America. Contrary to what the Soviets claim, these principles reflected liberal, democratic values rather than communist ones.

Following Morgan's presentation, audience members were treated to a screening of Lesya Kharchenko's film, based on interviews with diplomats and human rights activists, entitled "Back to the Helsinki Agreement", will follow.

After the film, Oxford Professor Timothy Garton Ash, who also works at Stanford University and Berlin and has published 10 books on history and politics, delivered a presentation on "How Central and Eastern Europeans have turned the Helsinki Agreement into a golden human rights standard for Europe."

The second part of the conference was opened by Andrei Sakharov's stedaughter, an independent researcher at Harvard University, Tatiana Yankelevich, currently living in Boston. It was Tatiana Yankelevich who came up with the idea to establish the Sakharov Center in Kaunas, at Vytautas Magnus University. Mrs. Yankelevich says that Sakharov's approach and position are relevant today in solving global problems such as dangerous, anti-democratic ultranationalism, energy dependence on oil-producing countries, and the right of nations to self-determination. "These concerns are significant for all of us, and especially for the younger generation," says Tatiana Jankelevich.

The following presentation was delivered live by Vyacheslav Bachmin, a former political prisoner, expert in philanthropy and civil society development, and head of the Sakharov Center in Moscow, who talked about the significance of Sakharov today. "He was a person who had the courage to step outside of his comfort zone, there were many occasions in Sakharov's life where he contradicted the opinion of the majority, believing that he was right. In today's Russia, many people face a situation where they have to make a fateful choice. Andrei Sakharov is an inspiring example for such people. He understood that at the center of this world are individuals, their rights and their dignities, and that respect for human rights is directly linked to world security", says Bachmin.

After Bachmin's speech, Nils Muižnieks spoke. Muižnieks was born and raised in the USA, and returned to Latvia after it regained independence, he has worked to strengthen the protection of human rights, was twice the Minister of Integration in Latvia, and was the Commissioner for Human Rights Council of Europe in 2012-2018. From 2020 – he was the Director of Amnesty International's European Regional Office. Recalling Sakharov, Muižnieks said: "He feared that intellectual freedom

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1921-2021

could be threatened not only by restrictions imposed by the government, but also by what he called the ‘opium of mass culture’- what we now call social media bubbles, fake news and conspiracy theories. "

The last speaker was a guest from Poland, Maia Mazurkiewicz, who runs Alliance4Europe, a pan European initiative which works in areas of political management, foreign affairs and communication, fighting disinformation and hate speech. Mazurkiewicz says: "Europe is currently in crisis. Populists and nationalists come to power, they use hate speech, disinformation and propaganda to control the world. This is not a new challenge, it was also well known to Andrei Sakharov, who said that freedom of thought is possible only if the human mind is not infected with mass myths that can turn into a bloody dictatorship. We need a new European vision for change. "

The presentations were followed by a discussion moderated by Robert van Voren, Director of Andrei Sakharov Research Center for Democratic Development at Vytautas Magnus University.

Tomorrow, Friday, at 6.30 pm, Sakharov's birthday concert will take place at the Vaidila Theater, hosted by Ukrainian pianist Alexei Botvinov. The concert will be broadcast live by LRT Klasika radio.

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