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Alarm and Hope. 21st Century International Conference
On the Centenary of the Birth of Dr Andrei Sakharov
Plenary session

On-line speech by Dunja Mijatović
Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights

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Peace, progress and human rights are about choosing the right side. When you decide to defend and promote them, you choose to take the side of those who seek freedom. You choose to think and act with independence. You choose to serve the public good.

This concrete, selfless devotion to the cause of humankind is the trademark of the life of Dr Andrei Dmitrievich Sakharov. He has paid a high price for his loyalty and commitment to these ideals, but he never buckled. Despite himself, he became the symbol of the struggle for freedom in the Soviet Union and beyond.

Andrei Sakharov could have enjoyed a relatively good life in the USSR. But his conscience told him differently. A relentless peace advocate, he devoted his life to promoting the understanding that human rights and international security are intertwined. How topical that message is today.

When Andrei Sakharov was denied the possibility to attend the ceremony which awarded him the 1975 Nobel Peace Prize, he tried to enter a courtroom in Vilnius where his friend, and co-founder of the Soviet chapter of Amnesty International, Sergei Kovalev, was facing a political trial in which he was denied both access to a lawyer of his choice and the testimony of Sakharov.

Sakharov's quest for freedom, honesty, justice did not buckle when KGB agents abducted him and flew him in exile in Gorky. The crackdown on dissidents became stronger and his wife, Elena Bonner, was caught in the gears of repression. Yet, Dr. Sakharov, continued to speak truth to the power. He opposed the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, defended human rights activists in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, and continued to advocate for disarmament and peace. His struggle for democracy continued after his release and election to the Congress of People's Deputies.

He died as he had lived: preparing to use his voice to defend human dignity for all. He was a champion of democratisation. He is a loadstar for today's struggles. His uncompromising challenge of tyranny and repression serves as an inspiration in contemporary Europe.

As I can see from my work as Council of Europe Commissioner for human rights, in contemporary Europe, human rights defenders are killed, abducted, jailed, harassed. The space for civil society dwindles. Democratic institutions are dismantled, independent judges removed, journalists silenced, academic freedom undermined.

But I also see a continuity between Sakharov's battles and the thousands of people who brave police violence, arbitrary detention and torture to demand democracy, human rights and the rule of law.

And this gives me hope. The battle for peace, progress and human rights is far from over. European societies are showing resilience and high-level moral figures continue their struggle also behind bars.

Sakharov is alive in these battles. He inspires those who defend human rights not as privilege but as essential to human dignity. He guides those who expose injustices. He motivates those who believe in the power of reason.

Sakharov's main lesson is that we must not remain silent in front of abuses. We must speak out and confront those who use power for personal advantages.

Because anytime we remain silent or inactive, a brick of the democratic edifice falls. Therefore, we too must choose our side. We must stand up to protect and promote peace, progress and human rights as part and parcel of our ambitions. We must choose to help those who are trying to strengthen democracy and accountability.

Today's ceremony is evidence of the respect and support that Andrei Sakharov still enjoys 32 years after he left us. Such events should not be just one-off happenings. They must be a stimulus to take up the torch of human rights, democracy and the rule of law that Sakharov enlightened.

Therefore, I salute the work of the Sakharov centre, because by keeping alive Sakharov's legacy they empower the next generations to continue his battle for human rights until they shine all over Europe, for everyone, every day.