

HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH

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Mr David Sassoli
President of the European Parliament
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Ms Heidi Hautala
Vice-President of the European Parliament responsible for the Sakharov Network
Bât. Altiero Spinelli, 09G130
60, rue Wiertz / Wiertzstraat 60
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Brussels, 28 October 2019

Re: Sakharov Prize for Iham Tohti and human rights in China

Dear President Sassoli and Vice-President Hautala,

I am writing on behalf of Human Rights Watch to thank you and the European Parliament for your selection of unjustly imprisoned Uyghur academic Ilham Tohti as the recipient of the 2019 Sakharov Prize. Human Rights Watch believes that by doing so the European Parliament has elevated much needed global attention to the human rights crisis for Turkic Muslims in Xinjiang and across China, and given critical support and hope to Professor Tohti and his family.

We are grateful for the European Parliament's ongoing efforts with regards to human rights in China, which have deteriorated significantly during President Xi Jinping's tenure. In Xinjiang more than one million Turkic Muslims have been arbitrarily detained in prison camps and forced to undergo political indoctrination. Children have been separated from their parents and families torn apart for the sole reason of being Muslim. The rights of Tibetans, Christians, and other ethnic and religious minorities are also under assault, and many of China's peaceful activists—feminists, environmentalists, and lawyers—have been harassed, forcibly disappeared, and sentenced to long prison terms.

Chinese authorities have built a surveillance state with extraordinarily intrusive capacities to monitor people's daily lives, largely with a view towards exerting maximum control over every

aspect of people's lives and decisions and engineering a dissent-free society. But, Chinese government-sponsored abuses no longer remain within China's borders: increasingly we have documented abuses including the forced return of asylum seekers to China following pressure from Beijing, harassment of human rights defenders at the United Nations, and threats to academic freedom around the world. At a time when fewer governments are willing to publicly stand up for human rights, it is heartening that elected parliamentarians in Europe and the European Union and its member states are pushing back against Chinese government violations.

We also urge that the European Parliament use the Sakharov Prize to further elevate the human rights crisis in Xinjiang to become a key priority for the European Union. We appreciate EU efforts, primarily at the United Nations Human Rights Council, to reiterate the need for access to Xinjiang by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. But, the gravity and scale of abuses continue without restraint. Meanwhile, there is little EU discussion of pushing for a formal UN inquiry, imposing targeted sanctions, or holding the Chinese leadership accountable for gross human rights violations — all actions the EU rightly advanced in response to the ruthless crackdown in Venezuela and in response to the ethnic cleansing of Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar, and all EU actions that might change Chinese officials' calculus about abusive policies in Xinjiang.

We urge that you use the occasion of the Sakharov Prize not just to recommit the European Parliament to its noteworthy resolutions and other efforts combating Chinese government human rights violations. We also urge that you deepen cooperation with your colleagues in national parliaments, EU institutions, and EU member states in a clear and deliberate manner to secure Professor Tohti's release. Consistent and unapologetic advocacy by European government officials led to the 2018 release of Liu Xia, widow of the 2010 Nobel Peace laureate Liu Xiaobo. A sustained and determined European effort on behalf of Ilham Tohti's release would increase the likelihood of his finally being able to reunite with his family, live in freedom, and continue his important work advocating for dialogue and human rights in Xinjiang and China.

The Chinese government wants the world to look the other way while it persecutes millions in Xinjiang, and it wants the world to forget about Ilham Tohti. With the decision to award the Sakharov Prize to Professor Tohti, the European Parliament has sent a clear message that Europe will keep the spotlight on China's gross human rights violations, including Tohti's incarceration, and will leave no stone unturned to secure his release.

We thank you and hope to work with you to ensure the EU uses its "full weight" to defend "advocates of liberty, democracy and human rights throughout the world."

I look forward to discussing these issues at your convenience.

Sincerely,

Lotte Leicht
EU Director
Human Rights Watch

CC:

MEP Manfred Weber, Chair of the European People's Party Group

MEP Iratxe Garcia Perez, Chair of the Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats in the European Parliament

MEP Dacian Cioloș, Chair of the Renew Europe Group

MEP Ska Keller and MEP Philippe Lamberts, co-Chairs of the Group of the Greens/European Free Alliance

MEP Marco Zanni, Chair of the Identity and Democracy Group

MEP Raffele Fitto and MEP Ryszard Legutko, co-Chairs of the European Conservatives and Reformists Group

MEP Manon Aubry and MEP co-Chairs of the Group of the European United Left - Nordic Green Left

MEP David McAllister, Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee

Members and Substitutes of the Foreign Affairs Committee

MEP Marie Arena, Chair of the Human Rights Subcommittee

Members and Substitutes of the Human Rights Subcommittee

MEP Reinhard Bütikofer, Chair of the Delegation for relations with the People's Republic of China

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