

Strasbourg, 17 December 2002

Address by Pat COX at the award ceremony of the 2002 Sakharov Prize to Oswaldo José Payá SARDINAS

check against delivery

Dear colleagues,

Mr Oswaldo Payá, allow me to express the emotion with which we welcome you today to award you the Sakharov Prize for freedom of thought.

It has been difficult to obtain your leave and re-entry visa for coming to Strasbourg, and I would like to thank all those who have worked to make it possible, including the members of the European Parliament who raised the matter with the Cuban authorities last week while there.

I asked the President of the Government of Cuba, Mr Fidel CASTRO, to let you come to this ceremony as a signal from the Cuban authorities of their recognition of the Human Rights agenda. I am happy that this signal has been given to the European Parliament.

Dear Oswaldo Payá,

you represent for lot of Cubans today what Andrei Sakharov represented in the Eighties for many Soviets: you represent hope.

Harassed, pursued, persecuted and condemned from youth for your opinions, which were openly critical of the government's official policies, you nevertheless continue to work on constructing your movement, the Christian Liberation Movement for peace.

You advocate national dialogue to enable democratic change in Cuba. You are working tirelessly to create an alternative, non-violent democracy, based on a wide coalition. Using the existing legal and political framework, you want to introduce reforms in order to initiate a process of transition to pluralist democracy, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Under your direction, the civil initiative " the Varela project" was born. This legislative initiative calls for a referendum on open elections, freedom of speech, freedom for political prisoners and free enterprise. To date, the project has attracted support from more than 100 organisations in Cuba and tens of thousands of individual signatures.

Together with other opposition leaders, you drafted the manifesto 'Todos Unidos' (everyone united) and for the first time, thanks to your action, the opposition has united together on a single initiative: the Varela project.

We recognise your endurance against a barrage of obstacles. And we recognise your courage. Your plan is not a theoretical construction; it does not promise heaven on earth but reminds people of basic principles for which so many have been fighting for centuries: respect for human rights and democratic principles.

Throughout the years, the European Parliament has taken the lead in keeping human rights high on the agenda.

This is not an abstract commitment; it was forged in the tragic experiences of Europe's barbaric twentieth century and it has been used over the last 50 years to construct a Europe that has learned from, but not forgotten, its past.

We are committed to the principles of democracy and respect for the universality and indivisibility of human rights, fundamental freedoms and the rule of law.

The Sakharov prize celebrates that commitment annually.

The Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought for 2002 is awarded to Oswaldo Payá, as a tribute to his commitment to Freedom of Thought, democracy and reconciliation of the Cuban people.

We salute Oswaldo Payá's decision to use the pen and not the sword, signatures and not bullets, peace and not terror, as the pathway to democracy in Cuba.

On your first ever visit anywhere outside Cuba, through you, Oswaldo Payá, the European Parliament honours all those who defend human rights, and their hard work in building democracy from the grassroots level, step by step, person by person, day by day.

Now I invite you to take the floor.