

Classical human rights are worth fighting for

Written by Mark Demesmaeker on 21 October 2016 in Opinion
Opinion

Crimean Tatar activist Mustafa Dzhemilev has spent his life defending human rights, and as such should win this year's Sakharov prize, says Mark Demesmaeker.



Mark Demesmaeker | *Photo credit: European Parliament audiovisual*

In the western world, we take human rights for granted. Our democratic values are grounded in them, but unfortunately we cannot claim human rights are universal.

Even at UN level, there are fundamentally different interpretations of human rights, between the classical and social branches of thinking.

Classical human rights have roots in ancient Greece and enlightenment philosophers like John Locke and Adam Smith. These rights are focused on decentralisation and grant autonomy to the individual, and therefore responsibility for his/her own welfare, which the state may not violate. Conversely,

social human rights demand a concentration of power in the state.

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These rights can be traced back to the French revolution, with fundamentalist belief in human rationalism and central government control. For example, social rights include the right to housing and electricity, heating, washing facilities and sanitation for everyone, regardless of economic status.

If these rights were to be considered legally binding with the same force as freedom of speech, it would be a violation towards the individual, if he/she experiences a decline in their standard of living.

This shows that these rights are completely incompatible with a free society where individuals are free and responsible for their own lives. Of course, in some countries people have more opportunities than others, but reliance on the state as an enabler of social standards undermines any sense of personal responsibility.

Not surprisingly, a number of third countries back social human rights and the power of the state as the responsible actor for peoples' welfare. Many of these countries have totalitarian regimes, which means that the classical human rights of decentralisation would be suicidal for the dictators.

Social human rights are fundamentally in conflict with equality and individual freedom, which classical human rights ensure.

This is why we need a new human rights policy based on the classical way of thinking. This new policy should serve as a guideline for the UN and strengthen its credibility as a human rights defender.

Focusing on classical rights will also enable the UN to strengthen those brave people who fight against classical human rights violations.

The ECR group in the European Parliament has nominated such an individual for this year's Sakharov Prize. His name is Mustafa Dzhemilev and he is a Crimean Tatar. He has spent his life fighting and defending human rights.

The Tatars are the original inhabitants of Crimea. When Mustafa was only six months old in 1944, Soviet authorities deported him and his family, and Mustafa grew up in exile in Uzbekistan.

He spent 15 years in jail and almost one year on hunger strike for defending human rights. At the age of 18, Mustafa and his activist friends established the Union of Young Crimean Tatars, striving for the recognition of the rights of Crimean Tatars to return to their homeland.

He was arrested several times for anti-Soviet activities and lived under surveillance. In 1989, he returned to Crimea with his family and, at the same time, he was elected to lead the new Crimean

Tatar National Movement. However, when he opposed Russia's annexation of Crimea 2014, he was banned from entering his homeland.

Mustafa Dzhemilev is now 72 and still going strong. As a politician in Ukraine, he continues his fight to oppose the Russian dominance in Ukraine and to defend human rights.

Rarely do we see a person so dedicated in this fight, who spends their lifetime defending their ideals and the rights for others. This is an enormous sacrifice, which goes beyond what we can grasp.

He deserves recognition from the rest of us. He should serve as an example to all of us, that classical human rights are worth fighting for. They are the foundation of our democracy, for which we will not compromise.

About the author

Mark Demesmaeker (ECR, BE) is a member of Parliament's foreign affairs committee

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