

# Nobel Prize committee hails US-aligned journalists, silent on Assange

Oscar Grenfell  
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The Nobel Prize awards earlier this month provided yet another case study in the selective, hypocritical and politically-motivated use of terms such as “freedom of the press” and “democratic rights” by the major imperialist powers and those institutions associated with them.

Amid escalating attacks on journalists around the world, part of a broader turn by capitalist governments to authoritarian forms of rule, the Norwegian Nobel Committee dedicated its highest award for 2021 to “Free, independent and fact-based journalism,” which “serves to protect against abuse of power, lies and war propaganda.” The committee declared it was “convinced that freedom of expression and freedom of information help to ensure an informed public,” and to “protect against war and conflict.”

As has been the case many times before when it comes to the Nobel Peace Prize, even limited scrutiny belies the lofty rhetoric. Founded by Alfred Nobel, the inventor of dynamite, the award has always reflected the political interests and concerns of powerful sections of the European ruling class, and often the US state, rather than the disinterested promotion of high ideals that it purports.

In one of the most notorious cases, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger received the top award in 1973 for his endeavours to bring peace to the world, amid the carnage unleashed by the American imperialism in Vietnam, and under conditions in which he could not leave the US for fear of being arrested and prosecuted as a war criminal.

In 2009, US President Barack Obama was awarded a peace prize, just nine months after his election, and with no discernable achievements that would warrant the distinction. He would proceed to be the first US president to continuously preside over wars during two terms of office, expanding the US bombardment of the Middle East and North Africa, and initiating aggressive confrontations with nuclear-armed Russia and China.

This year’s recipients are far from a Kissinger or Obama. However, in their celebration of press freedom, the Nobel Committee selected two journalists who have never challenged the interests of the major imperialist powers, or exposed their machinations, and who have spent their entire careers in alignment with the US state apparatus.

At the same time, the committee made no mention of WikiLeaks publisher Julian Assange, who has been the subject of an unprecedented campaign of international persecution by the US and its allies, for his exposures of American war crimes, mass surveillance operations and global diplomatic conspiracies. Assange’s case is a clear cut example of brutal political persecution for journalistic activities, and the dangers he faces, of either death or torturous life imprisonment, are undeniable.

In their announcement of the award, the Nobel Committee declared that the recipients “are representatives of all journalists who stand up for this ideal in a world in which democracy and freedom of the press face increasingly adverse conditions.”

There is no question that Maria Ressa and Dmitry Muratov have both been subjected to political attacks for their publishing.

Ressa was arrested in 2018, on trumped-up allegations by the Philippine government of President Rodrigo Duterte, after her *Rappler* outlet exposed the administration’s political corruption and murderous ‘war on drugs.’ Last year she was convicted of bogus “cyberlibel” charges, and while currently on bail, faces up to six years’ imprisonment.

Seven of Muratov’s colleagues at *Novaya Gazeta* have been murdered since 2000, in killings widely ascribed to the Russian state and its agencies.

Socialists oppose the repressive actions of the authoritarian, capitalist regimes in Russia and the Philippines. It is nevertheless the case that both Ressa and Muratov have come to international prominence because they are operating in key geo-political fault lines, where their activities dovetail closely with the operations of American imperialism.

US President Joseph Biden hailed the award, declaring that Ressa and Muratov “have pursued the facts—tirelessly and fearlessly. They have worked to check the abuse of power, expose corruption, and demand transparency. They have been tenacious in founding independent media outlets and defending them against forces that seek their silence.”

Biden’s real attitude to “fearless independent media outlets” is demonstrated by his administration’s current appeal, to be heard at the end of this month, against a British court decision

blocking Assange's extradition on the grounds that he would likely die in the hands of his US persecutors. As for "forces seeking to silence" journalists who "expose corruption" and "demand transparency," the Biden administration is trying to jail Assange for 175 years and to destroy WikiLeaks.

*Novaya Gazeta* was cofounded by Muratov, its current editor-in-chief, in 1993. Start-up funding came from Mikhail Gorbachev's Nobel Peace Prize, awarded in 1990 for his turn to capitalist restoration, a program that would result in the immiseration of millions of people as the Soviet Union's wealth was looted by a corrupt bureaucracy that gave rise to a class of criminal oligarchs.

This less than heroic origin story set a pattern that has persisted throughout the paper's history. A 2009 article by ABC News, titled "The Newspaper Loved in the West, Hated at Home" noted that "Alexander Lebedev, a former member of the Soviet foreign intelligence service" and "banking magnate is something of a cash machine for *Novaya Gazeta*."

"He has supported the paper since the 1990s. In June 2006, he and former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev acquired a 49-percent stake in *Novaya Gazeta*, which was on the verge of bankruptcy at the time. The employees owned the rest.

"Lebedev bought the employees' shares for about €1.5 million (\$2.1 million). Since then, he has injected millions into the money-losing paper every year."

A recent *New York Times* article noted that in 2014, the publication was similarly "rescued" by Sergei Adonyev, a Russian telecommunications tycoon.

*Novaya Gazeta* has consistently advanced the positions of these wealthy backers, who represent a section of the Russian ruling class seeking a more direct relationship with American imperialism and involved in various financial conflicts with the oligarchs around Russian President Vladimir Putin. This dissident faction of the ruling elite has been courted by the US, as part of its bid to end Putin's obstruction of US imperialist operations in the Middle East and Eastern Europe.

Muratov dedicated his Nobel Prize to Alexei Navalny, a leading figure in the country's opposition movement. Navalny, who has very limited popular support and a history of extreme-right wing politics, has been feted by the US and European powers, and has been a protagonist of their provocations against the Putin regime.

The connections between Maria Ressa and the US state are even more direct than Muratov's. After a decades-long career with major US outlets, including CNN, and a teaching role at Princeton University, Ressa founded *Rappler* in 2012. The publication has received substantial funding from the National Endowment for Democracy, an organisation established by Congress to advance US interests internationally. This fact has been exploited by the Duterte administration in its attempts to shut *Rappler*.

The publication has been at loggerheads with Duterte through much of his term in office. While it invokes opposition

to the thuggish president's attacks on democratic rights, *Rappler* has given voice to hostility from sections of the Philippine ruling class, and the US state, over Duterte's orientation towards China and away from the US.

In the lead-up to a presidential election, the publication is running a McCarthyite campaign against supposed Chinese influence in the Philippines, aimed at ensuring that the next incumbent toes the US line and turns away from Beijing. In April, Ressa held an "exclusive chat" with Hillary Clinton, in which the US warmonger spoke of her fears that "about the Philippines becoming basically a subject of China."

Ressa's conception of "press freedom" is strikingly similar to that of the US State Department. At a public forum held in Sydney in 2019, for instance, she declared that the internet and ability of individuals and online publications to disseminate information, posed the greatest threat to press freedom.

Ressa noted that one of the "great selling points of the internet and social media" was that it would "democratise" the publication of information—a trend she lamented. Mainstream media "gatekeepers" who had previously served an important role in "vetting" information, had been undermined. "We forgot the gatekeepers," she complained.

Ressa's attitude to Assange and WikiLeaks, not surprisingly, is one of intense hostility.

Asked about Assange's brutal arrest in April, 2019, Ressa did not condemn the attack against him or the US extradition attempt. Instead, she declared that he and WikiLeaks were not real journalists. This was because a true journalist "sifts through, decides and knows when something is of value to national security and withholds until you can verify that it isn't." The comments legitimised the prosecution of Assange, and its attempts to deny him the First Amendment press freedom protections of the US Constitution, as well as expressing Ressa's own fealty to the "national security" apparatus.

Such is the "fearless," "free" and "independent" journalism that can be funded by the American state and hailed by the Nobel Committee.



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