

Will giving the Nobel Peace Prize to two journalists make a difference? Yes it can.

By William Horsley, AEJ Media Freedom Representative

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The Norwegian Nobel Committee has awarded the Peace Prize to Dmitry Muratov, the editor of Novaya Gazeta in Russia, and Maria Ressa, the co-founder and editor of the investigative media outlet Rappler in the Philippines, in recognition of their “courageous fight“ for freedom of expression.

It is more than a badge of honour and a much-needed monetary award of over one million dollars to these Nobel laureates. By granting them this extraordinary honour the Nobel Committee addresses the conscience of the world. It raises public awareness of the need for urgent and effective actions to reverse what it calls the “adverse conditions” for democracy and freedom of the press today.

Can the awards help the cause of independent journalism in practical ways? Yes they can, by raising the political cost to repressive governments of targeting critical journalists to silence dissent and conceal corruption and abuses of power. The Nobel Committee has spoken in the name of the most powerful court in the world – the court of informed public opinion. Autocratic governments should take heed.

Tragically, the bravest journalists too often become martyrs to the cause of press freedom as victims of premeditated murders, like Anna Politkovskaya, Jamal Khashoggi, and Daphne Caruana Galizia. The citation of the 2021 award to Dmitry Muratov and Maria Ressa makes them “representatives of all journalists who stand up for this ideal” of freedom of expression. This affirms the crucial role of independent and fact-based journalism in protecting societies against abuse of power, lies and war propaganda. It sends a message to the world that freedom of expression and freedom of information are necessary both to safeguard the lives and work of journalists, and to ensure what the Nobel Committee calls “an informed public”. Both are preconditions for democracy to survive and flourish.

The headline-making announcement from Oslo is also a warning about a much darker reality. It is that much of the world is experiencing a “pandemic” of targeted violence coupled with media capture. Media capture is the process seen increasingly in all parts of the world whereby governments, and other powerful political and business interests, dominate, control or directly own influential media, and seek to weaponise that control to intimidate, criminalise and silence independent journalists and other sources of dissent.

Large numbers of journalists have been forced to flee their native countries or quit the profession. Many more have bowed to the pressure – including threats and inducements -- by agreeing to work for media that self-censor their own reporting.

So here is another powerful message which should be heeded by the dozens of Russian journalists who accepted fine medals from President Putin for aiding and abetting the military

annexation of Crimea; by the armies of trolls who take money from dictators to vilify and threaten journalists like Maria Ressa; and by time-serving public officials, prosecutors and judges whose complicity makes possible what UNESCO has identified as a pervasive worldwide climate of impunity that protects those who attack and kill journalists.

They should all hang their heads in shame. More than that, systematic abuses of state power and of the standards of international law must be vigorously countered and curtailed.

What next, then? To understand the dangers and obstacles facing Maria Ressa and Dmitry Muratov in their fight for genuine freedom of expression is already to see the outlines of the kind of actions that must be taken with renewed determination by civil society, media organisations, the international legal community, and above all state authorities themselves.

Maria Ressa, known to many as the foremost campaigner against the murderous nature of the Rodrigo Duterte regime's anti-drug campaign, has been the target of so many cyber libel and other spurious charges that she faced the prospect, if found guilty, of being condemned to jail terms totalling almost 100 years.

At the same time, the worldwide #HoldTheLine campaign <https://www.icfj.org/news/holdtheline-campaign-launched-support-maria-ressa-and-independent-media-philippines> in support of Maria Ressa has succeeded in bringing the gross injustices and vicious threats against her to widespread public attention. This year two of the libel cases against her were dropped. All the trumped-up charges must be withdrawn, and senior figures who abused their positions to prosecute those cases should be investigated and held to account.

Dmitry Muratov responded to the announcement of his award <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russian-editor-muratov-dedicates-nobel-prize-staff-murdered-their-work-2021-10-08/> by saying it truly belonged to the six journalists and contributors to Novaya Gazeta, including Anna Politkovskaya, who have been murdered during his 28 years as the newspaper's editor.

Three years ago the European Court of Human Rights ruled that Russia had failed to abide by its obligations under the European Convention of Human Rights to carry out an effective investigation into Anna Polikovskaya's assassination in 2006. The Court noted that several hitmen and accomplices had been convicted and sent to jail, but it found that the judicial process was deeply flawed and state authorities had failed to identify the person or persons who had commissioned the murder.

Anna Politkovskaya's family had alleged the involvement of agents from Russia's FSB domestic secret service or the Chechen government. A hard-hitting report published last year <https://www.ibanet.org/Investigations-report-launch-2020> by the High Level Panel of Legal Experts on Media Freedom reached the damning conclusion that across the world, in cases where influential figures are suspected in connection with the killing of a journalist, "powerful interests" regularly seek to block the investigation and judicial process every step of the way.

That report, written by human rights lawyer Nadim Houry, urged the international community to set up muscular new mechanisms, including a standing international Investigative Task Force, to strengthen investigations into attacks on journalists, challenge cultures of impunity wherever they take root, and so achieve accountability.

The Nobel Committee has now added its influential voice to the growing calls by United Nations agencies <https://en.unesco.org/themes/safety-journalists> and others for decisive actions to protect journalists and roll back what deserves to be called a “pandemic of impunity”. The award of the 2021 Peace Prize to two outstanding champions of press freedom is justified because this really is one of the defining issues of our time.