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And the Nobel Goes to … a Russian!

By Alexei Bayer

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Since its establishment more than a century ago, the Nobel Peace Prize has been the closest the global community has come to establishing a moral standard. It is awarded to those who seek peace, individual freedom and human dignity.

The choices of the Norwegian Nobel Committee have at times been hasty or controversial, but the harshest critics were the likes of the Soviet Union, apartheid South Africa and China, serving to reinforce the validity of the prize. It established, as writer Alexander Solzhenitsyn wrote in a 1973 essay, that the great antithesis of our time is not peace versus war, but peace versus oppression.

Over the past decade, the Scandinavians in charge of awarding Nobel Prizes have shown grave concern over the rise of the radical right in the American political mainstream. In 2002, the Peace Prize went to Jimmy Carter, nominally for his work after losing the 1980 presidential race to Ronald Reagan. But Carter was also the most liberal and civic-minded of recent U.S. presidents, and as such he remains a frequent target of right-wing vitriol. ⊠

Another Democratic presidential candidate, Al Gore, was one of the recipients of the Peace Prize in 2007. The Nobel Committee recognized his environmental work, but once again the symbolism was hard to miss: Gore was George W. Bush's losing opponent in the 2000 race for the White House. In 2008, the prize for economics went to Paul Krugman, whose columns in The New York Times provided trenchant and consistent critical analysis of Bush's right-wing economic, political and military agenda.

The choice of Barack Obama as the 2009 Peace Prize laureate raised eyebrows because in his few months on the job he had accomplished nothing noteworthy. It was, however, an award to American voters, who appeared to have rejected right-wing extremism by electing Obama.

In Russia, the radical right is also on the ascendance. Russian leaders are interested in little besides stuffing their own pockets — certainly not in the well-being and prosperity of their country. They cling to power by stirring murky nationalist forces in the guise of patriotism, that final refuge of scoundrels. They try to convince their people that democracy, freedom and openness are ploys devised by the West to steal Russian oil and other natural resources. The Russian Orthodox Church, which used to be persecuted by the Communists, is now becoming a tool of obscurantism, xenophobia and repression, allying itself to the cynical regime.

It is time for the Nobel Peace Prize to go to a Russian. To Mikhail Khodorkovsky, perhaps, who courageously speaks out from jail against corruption and lawlessness, or to a human rights group such as Russia Behind Bars, which works on behalf of those who were jailed on trumped-up charges. Or it could go to Russian journalists, who continue to shed light on government abuses even though the most outspoken of them have been beaten or killed, or to environmentalists, who are regularly attacked by thugs for opposing predatory development projects. Or to the young Russians who keep wearing the white ribbons of protest, braving arrests and beatings by the OMON, Russia's militarized police force.

There is little chance that a Nobel Peace Prize would scare Russian rulers or shame them into altering their course. The four prizes that went to opponents of the American far right did nothing to prevent its continued resurgences. But it is important to set a moral compass, since the two powers that 70 years ago came together to defeat fascism are themselves in danger of sliding into right-wing radicalism.

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