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Russians Among Favorites for Nobel Peace Prize

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Russian rights activists and religious leaders working for Muslim-Christian reconciliation are among the favorites to receive the 2012 Nobel Peace Prize, the winner of which will be announced Friday.

The year has brought few notable peace breakthroughs, leaving an unusually large selection of names in circulation and perhaps increasing the chance of a surprise winner.

The betting agency Unibet favors Maggie Gobran, a Coptic Christian nun who runs a children's mission in Cairo, giving her a 13 percent chance of winning.

A direct recognition of the Arab Spring is unlikely, however, as the committee gave part of its 2011 award to the journalist Tawakkol Karman to recognize her work in Yemen's transformation, and it rarely visits an issue two years running.

The committee could recognize the struggle to prevent an erosion of human rights in Russia. Such a choice would probably touch off a diplomatic row, especially as committee chair

Thorbjoern Jagland is also the secretary general of the Council of Europe, which promotes human rights, democracy and the rule of law in its 47 member countries, including Russia.

Although the Norwegian Nobel Committee is independent of the government, its members are picked by parliament and Jagland is a former prime minister, so foreign governments often see it as an affiliate of the Norwegian state.

China froze diplomatic ties with Norway in 2010 when Jagland's committee gave the prize to dissident Liu Xiaobo, accusing Norway of interfering in its internal affairs.

"Russian names are always on the list but if they wanted to give democracy-oriented movements in Russia a push, this would be the year for that," said Jan Egeland, the Director of Human Rights Watch Europe.

The list of potential Russian laureates includes Svetlana Gannushkina and the civil rights society Memorial that she helps to lead, and the radio station Ekho Moskvy and its editor Alexei Venediktov.

The committee received 231 nominations this year, including 43 organizations. The winner will receive 8 million Swedish crowns ($1.21 million), 2 million less than last year, as the economic downturn has taken a toll on Alfred Nobel's estate.

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