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Mired in Crisis, European Union Wins Nobel Peace Prize



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Thorbjorn Jagland, the chairman of the Norwegian Nobel Committee, announced the winner of the peace prize on Friday in Oslo.

By ALAN COWELL and WALTER GIBBS Published: October 12, 2012 | 22 Comments

PARIS — The Norwegian Nobel Committee awarded its 2012 peace prize on Friday to the 27-nation European Union, lauding its role over six decades in building peace and reconciliation among enemies who fought Europe's bloodiest wars, even as the Continent wrestles with economic strife that threatens its cohesion and future.

The award also seemed to illuminate competing visions of Europe as both historical unifier and meddlesome overlord, recalling deep strains within the bloc, primarily between Germany and other European nations over Berlin's insistence on austerity to resolve the euro crisis, measures that have brought pain to Greece and Spain in particular.

Thorbjorn Jagland, the former Norwegian prime minister who is chairman of the panel awarding the prize, said there had been deep concern about Europe's destiny as it faces the debt-driven woes that have placed the future of the single currency in jeopardy.

"There is a great danger," he said in an interview in Oslo. "We see already now an increase of extremism and nationalistic attitudes. There is a real danger that Europe

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The European Parliament in Strasbourg, France.

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will start disintegrating. Therefore, we should focus again on the fundamental aims of the organization.”

Asked if the euro currency would survive, he replied: “That I don’t know. What I know is that if the euro fails, then the danger is that many other things will disintegrate as well, like the internal market and free borders. Then you will get nationalistic policies again. So it may set in motion a process which most Europeans would dislike.”

In announcing the award, Mr. Jagland described it as a signal focusing on the union’s historical role binding France and Germany together after World War II and its perceived impact in spreading reconciliation and democracy beyond the Iron Curtain that once divided Europe and on to the Balkans. “The stabilizing part played by the E.U. has helped to transform most of Europe from a continent of war to a continent of peace,” he said.

José Manuel Barroso, president of the European Commission, said the award proved that the European body was “something very precious.”

“It is justified recognition for a unique project that works for the benefit of its citizens and also for the benefit of the world,” he said. “The award today by the Nobel Committee shows that even in these difficult times, the European Union remains an inspiration for countries and people all over the world and that the international community needs a strong European Union.”

Norway is not a member of the European Union, and Mr. Jagland said some people in his country were not aware of the historical role it had played.

“The union and its forerunners have for over six decades contributed to the advancement of peace and reconciliation, democracy and human rights in Europe,” Mr. Jagland said.

He added: “The dreadful suffering in World War II demonstrated the need for a new Europe. Over a 70-year period, Germany and France had fought three wars. Today, war between Germany and France is unthinkable.”

At a news conference, Mr. Jagland said the committee had “no ambitions” that the \$1.2 million prize would solve the multibillion-euro crisis, and suggested that the origin of Europe’s current economic uncertainty was the United States.

“There are many things to say about the economic crisis — where it originated, for instance,” he said. “It started in the United States, and we had to deal with it.”

He added, “It started with Lehman Brothers.”

In Greece, the powder keg of Europe, where society is fraying under the weight of austerity, the choice of winner generated little warmth.

“I think it’s unfair,” said Stavros Polychronopoulos, 60, a retired lawyer, as he stood on Friday in central Syntagma Square in Athens, where residue from tear gas fired by the police during demonstrations on Tuesday to protest a visit by the German chancellor, Angela Merkel, still clung to the sidewalks.

“The leader of the E.U. is Germany, which is in an economic war with southern Europe,” Mr. Polychronopoulos said. “I consider this war equal to a real war. They don’t help peace.”

Three years of austerity imposed by Greece’s foreign lenders in exchange for rescue funding have led to a 25 reduction in Greece’s overall economy. Unemployment is now at 25 percent, rising to 50 percent for young people.

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Some Greeks greeted the news of the [Nobel Prize](#) as a step in the right direction. “Maybe it’s an optimistic sign that maybe we can reach peace,” Iota Harouli, 26, a recent graduate in economics, said as she walked in downtown Athens.

European officials immediately raised the question of who would accept the peace prize on behalf of the bloc’s often bickering members, divided by tensions between its more affluent north and its struggling south. They are also frequently at odds over personality differences and critical questions, like whether Turkey should be admitted and whether the euro zone should include more countries than its current 17.

At its headquarters in Brussels, several figureheads compete for prominence, including Mr. Barroso, the president of the European Commission, which enforces European treaties, and [Herman Van Rompuy](#), the president of the European Council, which represents heads of European Union governments.

Additionally, the president of the European Parliament, Martin Schulz, said in a statement that his institution expected to be part of the award ceremony.

The rivalries recalled a remark ascribed to Henry A. Kissinger, the former United States secretary of state: “Who do I call if I want to call Europe?”

The differences extend beyond the Continent’s many languages to broader questions of commitment to the European integration project.

Some Europeans questioned whether the bloc’s track record in the Balkan wars of the 1990s and in the current economic crisis justified a prize for spreading peace.

Carl Bildt, [Sweden](#)’s foreign minister, said on Twitter: “I warmly congratulate all of Europe and our peace to the Nobel Peace Prize to the European Union. Highly deserved and highly important!”

But more skeptical views emerged, particularly from British politicians facing pressure from within the dominant Conservative Party and groups further to the right for a radical revision of Britain’s relationship with continental Europe.

“The Nobel Committee is a little late for an April Fool’s joke,” said Martin Callanan, a British member of the European Parliament and the leader of the European Conservatives and Reformists group.

“The E.U.’s policies have exacerbated the fallout of the financial crisis and led to social unrest that we haven’t seen for a generation,” he said. “Presumably, this prize is for the peace and harmony on the streets of Athens and Madrid,” he added, referring to protests against austerity measures.

In his announcement, Mr. Jagland noted: “In the 1980s, Greece, Spain and Portugal joined the E.U. The introduction of democracy was a condition for their membership. The fall of the [Berlin Wall](#) made E.U. membership possible for several Central and Eastern European countries, thereby opening a new era in European history. The division between East and West has to a large extent been brought to an end; democracy has been strengthened; many ethnically based national conflicts have been settled.

“The admission of Croatia as a member next year, the opening of membership negotiations with Montenegro, and the granting of candidate status to Serbia all strengthen the process of reconciliation in the Balkans. In the past decade, the possibility of E.U. membership for Turkey has also advanced democracy and human rights in that country,” he said.

The award vindicated some of those who contributed to the earlier moments of postwar European integration. Maurice Faure, the last living French signatory to the 1957 Treaty of Rome, which established the European Economic Community, a precursor to the modern union, called the prize “the finest reward, the official recognition of what we developed, notably peace.”

From a modern French perspective, the office of President [François Hollande](#) said the award “confers upon Europe an even greater responsibility, that of the preservation of its unity, of the capacity to promote growth and employment, and of the solidarity it must show toward its members.”

The peace prize was the climax of a week in which Nobel institutions have awarded prizes in science and literature that rank among the world’s most coveted emblems of excellence. The prize for economics is to be awarded on Monday.

Last year’s peace prize was shared by President [Ellen Johnson Sirleaf](#) of Liberia; a Liberian antiwar activist, [Leymah Gbowee](#); and [Tawakkul Karman](#), a democracy activist in Yemen.


The peace prize, which [President Obama](#) won in 2009, is one of five awards set up more than century ago by the Swedish industrialist Alfred Nobel. The 2010 winner was [Liu Xiaobo](#), a Chinese human rights campaigner. There are now six awards, including the economics prize.

Alan Cowell reported from Paris, and Walter Gibbs from Oslo. Reporting was contributed by Stephen Castle from London, James Kanter from Brussels, Rachel Donadio from Athens, Nicholas Kulish and Victor Homola from Berlin and Scott Sayare and Maïa de la Baume from Paris.

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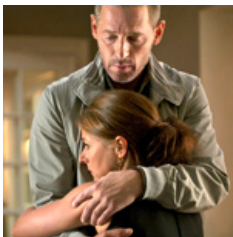
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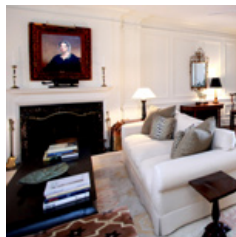
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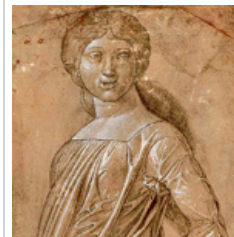


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