

2 Students Accept Putin's China Prize

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BEIJING — Two Russian exchange students have accepted a Chinese peace prize on behalf of Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, who was honored for enhancing Russia's status and crushing anti-government forces in Chechnya, the prize organizers said.

The Confucius Peace Prize was hastily launched last year as an alternative to the Nobel Peace Prize, which had just honored imprisoned Chinese dissident Liu Xiaobo. The 2011 prize ceremony took place Friday, a day before this year's Nobel prize was awarded in Oslo, Norway, to three women for their "non-violent struggle" for women's safety and for women's rights to participate in peace-building work.

The Confucius Peace Prize organization announced last month that Putin had been chosen to receive this year's award, saying that during his 2000-08 tenure as president, Putin "brought remarkable enhancement to the military might and political status of Russia." It also cited Putin's crushing of anti-government forces in Chechnya.

Qiao Damo, head of the China International Peace Research Center, said he hopes that the exchange students, who were apparently selected to stand in for Putin, will be able to give the prize to Putin, either in Beijing when he next visits or in Moscow.

The pair are studying at Beijing Language and Culture University, Qiao said in a telephone interview. He gave their names as Katya and Maria but was unsure of their surnames. Two students from Belarus were also present, he said.

The ceremony for the inaugural prize last year had its own surreal tint. Honoree former Taiwanese Vice President Lien Chan was unaware of the proceedings and did not attend, so the prize was given to a young girl whom the organizers refused to identify.

The Confucius Prize sponsors are professors and academics who say they are independent of China's government.

It was launched to promote traditional Chinese and Asian ideas of peace, Qiao said. He criticized the Nobel Committee's criteria for choosing peace prize recipients over the past two years, saying it had "drifted further and further away from the concept of peace."

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