

Merkel Faces Balancing Act in Kremlin

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Putin and Merkel speaking in Russia's Black Sea resort city Sochi in 2007. **Dmitry Astakhov**

Angela Merkel faces a seemingly impossible task in Moscow on Friday.

During the course of a visit scheduled for just eight hours, the German chancellor is expected to mend serious rifts in mutual ties while at the same time telling President Vladimir Putin that the crackdown on the opposition is going too far.

Relations between Berlin and Moscow, which Putin has characterized as “privileged” in the past, have been overshadowed by unusually blunt criticism of the Kremlin by German politicians.

Last Friday, the German Bundestag expressed alarm over the ongoing persecution of opposition leaders and Kremlin critics like the jailed members of the punk band Pussy Riot by passing a motion that calls on the government to campaign for more democracy and rule of law in Russia.

The nonbinding motion was prepared by Andreas Schockenhoff, a lawmaker from Merkel's Christian Democrat party and Berlin's point man for civil society relations with Russia. Last month, the Foreign Ministry got so angry at Schockenhoff that a ministry source told Interfax that Moscow refused to recognize him as a government official because of his "libelous" remarks.

Campaigners stepped up the pressure this week. On Wednesday, Human Rights Watch called on Merkel to live up to the resolution and urge Putin "to end the crackdown on civil society."

"There has never been a more important time to put human rights front and center of Germany's relationship with Russia," Hugh Williamson, the organization's director for Europe, said in a [statement](#).

On the other hand, German business is urging Merkel to avoid confrontation and stick to Berlin's traditional pragmatist course toward Moscow.

"Germany has been an important mediator between Russia and the West in the past decades," Eckhard Cordes, chairman of the influential Committee on Eastern European Economic Relations, said last month. "I trust that Germany will continue to fulfill this role," he added.

This was echoed by Frank Schauff, CEO of the Association of European Business, who said Wednesday that ties need to improve. "It is always better to have good political ties between trading partners," he told The Moscow Times.

Trade between both countries is expected to reach a record \$102 billion this year, according to the Russo-German Chamber of Commerce, making Germany the nation's second-largest trading partner behind China.

German firms are increasingly looking to Russia as European markets stagger through the ongoing eurozone debt crisis.

Energy is a key ingredient in trade ties, and analysts have said Merkel's decision to phase out nuclear power by 2022 means greater leverage for Russia and its abundance of fossil fuels.

Some experts argue that Russia's role will be diminished because of fundamental changes in the gas market. They point to the rise of liquefied natural gas, or LNG, and shale gas, which are currently underdeveloped in Russia.

Vladimir Milov, a former deputy energy minister who now is an opposition leader, said the fact that Gazprom had already lowered prices in Europe this year was a sign that Russia missed the boat.

"Rather than Europeans standing in line for Russian gas, Gazprom should be running to Merkel to lobby their interests," he said.

But Schauff argued that the country would remain among the most important energy providers for 20 years to come. "Russia remains the biggest single player in Europe and a key place to be for business," he said.

Schauff said he hoped that progress would be achieved at the Petersburg Dialogue, an annual

forum for experts from both countries, which kicked off in Moscow on Wednesday night. Merkel and Putin are expected to attend the forum's final plenary debate Friday afternoon.

The forum includes an "angry citizens" round table Thursday to debate parallels between the protest movement that has sprung up in Russia over the past year and rallies against a new train station in the southern German city of Stuttgart.

Lothar de Maiziere, the forum's German co-chairman, said Wednesday that "tensions have been the elixir of life" since the event's 2001 inception, according to an e-mailed statement.

Schauff also criticized the Bundestag resolution as one-sided: "Yes, you need to address disagreements openly but that should not be all. You also need to look forward," he said.

Alexander Graf Lambsdorff, a German member of the European parliament, said Merkel was facing an extremely difficult balancing act because of unprecedented political pressure.

He argued that the unusually harsh tone of the Bundestag resolution showed that disappointment over Putin was rife among Germany's governing coalition.

"This was not written by some rights activists but by people from her own camp," he said by telephone from Brussels.

Lambsdorff is a member of the German Free Democrats, a junior coalition partner of Merkel's Christian Democrats.

German Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle, who is also a Free Democrat, tried to solve the dilemma earlier this week by saying that while partnership did also mean criticism, Moscow should not be antagonized.

"The challenges of our time cannot be tackled without Russia, let alone against its will. They can only be met together with this great nation," Westerwelle wrote in the Frankfurter Allgemeine daily, according to an English-language [transcript](#) on his ministry's website.

Hans-Henning Schroder, an analyst with the German Institute for International and Security Affairs, said Friday's talks, which run parallel to intergovernmental talks between both countries' Cabinet ministers, would likely see some tough talking.

He argued that as with British-Russian ties, a dip in political relations does not necessarily hinder economic ones. Relations between London and Moscow went through the worst post-Cold War period after the 2006 poisoning death of Kremlin critic Alexander Litvinenko in London, while trade figures did not go down.

But Schroder warned that nobody expected Merkel to seriously depart from Berlin's hitherto-pragmatic policies toward Moscow, not least because Russia's role in German politics was eclipsed by the European Union and the ongoing currency crisis.

"This government won't shift its foreign policy course before the next general election," he said. Germany's parliamentary election will take place next fall.

Schroder added that this was mirrored by Moscow's recent emphasis on relations with the

East. “The Kremlin is busy with Eurasia and Asia,” he said.

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