

Peskov Plays Down Criticism Ahead of German Talks

By [Nikolaus von Twickel](#)

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On the eve of crucial talks with German Chancellor Angela Merkel, President Vladimir Putin's spokesman blamed "hotheads" and the start of the election campaign for a growing chorus of criticism from Berlin.

"We know very well about the sharpened anti-Russian rhetoric in Germany over the past months," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters Thursday, RIA-Novosti reported.

Peskov was referring to a recent German parliament resolution that criticizes the assaults on democracy and the worsening human rights situation in Russia and calls on Merkel to address this during Friday's consultations at the Kremlin.

Peskov said that while Putin was prepared to answer any questions, the criticism came from circles of "hotheads" who can hardly be counted as friends of Russia.

"There are some people, obsessed with stereotypes, with whom it is difficult to talk and hardly this will have any effect," he was quoted as saying.

The spokesman also blamed the German election cycle by saying it was obvious some politicians wanted to play "the anti-Russian card" in their own interest.

"We would not want to see Russian-German relations being used for such purposes," he said.

General elections in Germany take place next fall.

Peskov was speaking as lawmakers, pundits and journalists from both countries mingled at the Moscow opener of the Petersburg Dialogue, an annual forum aimed at fostering mutual understanding.

One of the forum's panels was called "Listening to Each Other," but participants said it consisted mainly of monologues. In an address to the panel, State Duma International Affairs Committee chairman Alexei Pushkov denounced the German criticism as being based on "double standards," before leaving the venue at the Hotel Ukraina early.

Another panel, which debated recent protests in both Moscow and the southern German city of Stuttgart, concluded that both movements had little in common with each other.

Christopher Lauer, an activist in Germany's Pirate Party, argued that the protests in his country were local and directed against costly construction projects or expenditures of tax money.

"Nobody would take to the streets to protest against fraudulent elections," he said.

The forum ends Friday afternoon with a plenary session in the Kremlin, which Putin and Merkel plan to attend.

The German chancellor will then hold talks with Putin, and the German and Russian Cabinet ministers will meet separately for intergovernmental talks. Also, Merkel and Putin plan to oversee the signing of a number of business deals before a news conference and a Kremlin dinner.

In an important signal, Merkel is then expected to meet opposition representatives during a late-night reception at the German ambassador's residence.

Germany is Russia's second-largest trading partner, after China. Peskov said the bilateral trade figures, which are expected to peak at \$102 billion this year, are a "safety net" against trouble.

"You can relax if you have such a firm foundation," he said.

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