

Merkel Scolds Putin Over NGO Crackdown

April 08, 2013

The  Moscow Times

German Chancellor Angela Merkel has scolded President Vladimir Putin over a Russian crackdown on nongovernmental organizations, saying Russia's economy needed civil society in addition to its natural resources to prosper.

Merkel, opening an industrial fair highlighting Russian business in Hanover late Sunday, told the visiting Putin that Germany was ready to assist the Russian government in its efforts to innovate and diversify the economy.

"We believe this can happen most successfully when there is an active civil society," she said.

"We must intensify these discussions, develop our ideas, and we must give the NGOs, who we know as a motor for innovation, a good chance in Russia," she added to loud applause.

(Read more about the industrial fair [here](#) and an earlier story about Putin's visit [here](#).)

In an earlier interview with German broadcaster ARD, Putin dismissed criticism of the NGO

inspections and said they would not cast a shadow over his visit.

"The only thing we want to know is who receives the money and where it goes," he said.

A Kremlin-backed law approved last year required all NGOs that receive funds from abroad and engage in vaguely defined political activities to register as "foreign agents." Leading Russian NGOs pledged to boycott the bill. The Prosecutor General's Office responded by ordering wide-ranging checks of up to 2,000 NGOs across the country to check their compliance with the law. The NGOs targeted, among others, were the German Konrad Adenauer Foundation, which is aligned with Merkel's conservative Christian Democratic Union, and the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, which has links to the center-left Social Democratic Party.

In his address to the trade fair, Putin focused on Russia's economic strength, noting, "despite global disarray and the global financial crisis, our country has continued to develop positively."

Outside hundreds of protesters gathered, many carrying Syrian flags, others wearing devil masks or waving images of Putin dressed in a prisoner's striped uniform. "Stop political terror," read one banner.

Putin has rejected Western criticism of Russia's stance on Syria, saying that the "massacre" in the civil war-torn Arab country must be stopped, but that it could only be done through talks between the government and the opposition.

In the ARD interview, Putin rejected the West's criticism of Russia for continuing to supply weapons to Syrian President Bashar Assad's regime, saying that such shipments do not violate international law. The Russian president criticized those who send weapons to the Syrian opposition, who he said were fighting a "legitimate government."

Materials from Reuters and The Associated Press are included in this report.

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