

Beat: News

Hollandes Putin standoff fuels French election debate

French election debate

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USPA NEWS - French President Francois Hollande is under fire from left and right-wing politicians over how he has tackled Russian President Vladimir Putin on the Syria crisis, with some criticising a rush to a "Cold War" against an essential European partner.

French officials have grown increasingly angry over Russian-backed Syrian government attacks on rebel-held areas of the city of Aleppo.

Things came to a head this week when Hollande refused to roll out the red carpet for Putin on a planned visit to Paris next week, demanding instead that the trip be restricted to talks on Syria where he said Moscow was carrying out war crimes.

Putin declined those terms and cancelled the trip, prompting Hollande's opponents with an eye to next year's presidential election to break the usual French bipartisan consensus on foreign policy.

"The duty of France and Europe is that Russia, France and Europe talk. I have disagreements with Putin, but how do you find a solution if you don't talk?" said former President Nicolas Sarkozy, who hopes to win the conservative Les Republicains party ticket for April's presidential election.

"How do you solve a crisis only through communiques, shunning each other or entering a new Cold War? It's irresponsible."

Sarkozy's comments looked like an opportunistic way to attack Hollande's relatively positive foreign policy achievements of the last four years - one of the few areas where he has not faced criticism at home.

Sarkozy compared the outgoing president's actions with his own record - the negotiation with Putin of a peaceful resolution to a crisis in Georgia in 2008.

Even the usually placid former prime minister Francois Fillon, another conservative vying to be a presidential candidate, said Hollande had been "ridiculed" and had "discredited" France's foreign policy by refusing to receive Putin at the inauguration of a Russian Orthodox church overlooking the Eiffel Tower.

The stance of the French right on Socialist Hollande's intransigence is in stark contrast to Britain, where a right-wing government this week urged an even tougher approach to Moscow in light of daily bombings in Aleppo.

PUTIN FASCINATION

This could of course be largely electioneering. However, within the French foreign policy establishment, some diplomats and politicians also accuse Hollande of pursuing a "neo-conservative" agenda and thus weakening Europe as a whole.

They accuse the French leadership of doing the United States' bidding in an era when Washington has pulled back from overseas adventures. They yearn for the days of President Charles de Gaulle, who withdrew France from NATO's military structure in 1966 to underline Paris' sovereignty and independence.

Their approach has also found favour among an increasingly isolationist and populist electorate shocked by Islamist militant attacks on French soil and by the refugee crisis.

So while foreign policy does not usually have much impact on an election debate, the Syria crisis and its impact on Franco-Russia relations are a special case.

"Francois Hollande's attitude is unbearable. We are completely aligned to the United States. We are running ahead and that attitude is not in the interests of France," said Jean-Luc Melenchon, a far-left presidential candidate, who is credited with about 10 percent of the

national vote.

He described Hollande's accusations of Russian war crimes in Syria as "chitchat".

Putin also stimulates a certain fascination among the French, who believe he incarnates an authority that stands up to Washington, but also, in the current climate, an iron fist in the fight against radical Islam.

An IFOP poll taken just after Russia began air strikes last September, showed that 25 percent of French had a favourable opinion of Putin.

That figure increased to 37 percent among those who back the far-right National Front, whose leader Marine Le Pen is widely expected to reach the runoff stage in the presidential election.

She has said she admires Putin, and believes France should seek an alliance with him and the Syrian government to fight Islamist militants.

"France's role is diplomacy, and that means speaking to all powers, nations and making our voice heard," her campaign director David Rachline said.

"Let's not forget that it is Mr Putin who is fighting Islamic State on the ground, so we should have contact with these people."

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