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## **FRENCH PRESIDENTIAL RIVALS SPAR OVER RUSSIA, PUTIN**

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French conservative presidential hopefuls Francois Fillon and Alain Juppe traded blows over Russia on November 24 in their final debate before a second-round primary, with Juppe criticizing his rival's perceived bond with the Kremlin.

Referring to Russian President Vladimir Putin's recent warm words about Fillon, the frontrunner and former prime minister, Juppe said during the televised debate that "this must be the first presidential election in which the Russian president chooses his candidate."

Fillon has backed a strategic alignment with Moscow and advocated lifting EU sanctions targeting Russia over its seizure of Ukraine's Crimea territory and backing of separatists in eastern Ukraine.

He shrugged off Juppe's criticism, saying that "Russia is a dangerous country if we treat it as we have treated it for the last five years."

"We are allies of the U.S. -- we share fundamental principles with the U.S. that we don't with Russia," Fillon said.

He added, however, that current French President Francois Holland's stance on Russia -- including his backing of sanctions -- has served to isolate Moscow.

If Fillon defeats Juppe in the November 27 primary, he is widely expected to square off and defeat far-right candidate Marine Le Pen, who also supports closer ties to Moscow, in a presidential election in May.

Fillon captured 44 percent of the vote in the first-round primary last week, while Juppe garnered less than 29 percent. Former French President Nicolas Sarkozy, under whom Fillon served as prime minister, was eliminated in the first-round contest.

The debate came a day after Putin praised Fillon as "a professional to a high extent" and a man who is "able to maintain his point of view."

The Kremlin and senior Russian officials have already voiced optimism that Moscow's ties with the West could improve following Republican U.S. President-elect Donald Trump's stunning victory this month over Democratic rival Hillary Clinton.

Trump has praised Putin and said he would like to mend Washington's battered ties with the Kremlin in order to boost cooperation on matters like counterterrorism.

France and Germany have been among the leading EU voices in pressuring Russia over its annexation of Crimea in March 2014 and backing of the separatists in eastern Ukraine.

Aleksei Pushkov, the head of the foreign affairs committee in Russia's lower house of parliament, said following Fillon's first-round primary victory that should he win the French presidency, it would mark the "end of the Berlin-Paris tandem" concerning Russia.

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Kaynak/Source: