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WEST TO TAKE RUSSIA TO TASK AT G8 ENERGY MEETING

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Western countries will voice concern that Russia is using energy exports to pressure its neighbours and muscle in on the European market when G8 energy ministers meet here next month, a European Union official said on Thursday.

"Russia and the USSR have been a reliable partner for the last 40 years... We believe they will continue to be but are worried that they want to control the whole energy chain," the EU official told AFP on the sidelines of an energy forum in Moscow.

"Energy should be treated as a normal commodity and not for other purposes."

The EU official said energy security was "very high on the agenda of (G8) heads of state", due to a recent gas price dispute between Russian gas giant Gazprom and Ukraine that disrupted supplies to both Ukraine and western Europe, and recent disruptions of Russian gas supplies to Georgia, Moldova and Italy.

The head of the International Energy Agency, which coordinates energy policy among 26 oil consuming nations, said Thursday that finance ministers from Moscow's seven partners in the G8 were also to take up the issue of Russian supplies at meetings here this week end.

IEA executive director Claude Mandil said the finance ministers were expected to voice concerns about the monopoly over Russian gas exports enjoyed by state-controlled giant Gazprom.

Gazprom, which is estimated to control about a third of total world natural gas reserves, was the only Russian gas producer authorised to export because it also owned the pipeline network, Mandil told French radio BFM.

"If another gas producer in Russia wants to export, it's told 'Sorry, there's no room in my pipelines'," Mandil said.

"That is not acceptable and I think the ... finance ministers will raise this point at the weekend."

Thursday's energy forum was designed to lay the groundwork for a meeting of G8 energy ministers scheduled for March 15-16, one of a string of events Russia is hosting this year as chair of the group of leading economic powers.

Russia's deputy minister for industry and energy, Andrei Reus, assured delegates at the forum that as chair of the G8, Russia intended "to demonstrate its important role in world affairs as a reliable, responsible partner".

"One of the central themes of Russia's chairmanship is the question of building a system of global energy security," he said.

Countries such as Italy have encountered problems obtaining the gas supplies they have ordered from Moscow because of a surge in domestic Russian demand during what is an extremely cold winter.

There has also been concern over reports that Gazprom would like to expand into downstream gas activities in west European countries such as Britain.

The government in London warned Gazprom last week that a bid for British energy group Centrica would face regulatory scrutiny, although Russian officials later appeared to pull back from reports that they were preparing such an offer.