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CHENEY HITS AT PUTIN OVER ENERGY 'BLACKMAIL' *FIERCE ATTACK ON KREMLIN'S GROWING AUTHORITARIANISM

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VILNIUS

Dick Cheney, US vice-president, yesterday criticised the rule of Vladimir Putin, Russian president, warning the Kremlin against using gas and oil supplies as "tools of intimidation and blackmail" and accusing the Russian authorities of "unfairly" restricting citizens' rights.

It was the strongest public rebuke by a senior US official of Russia's growing authoritarianism and its increasing willingness to employ energy policy for political ends.

His words will have particular impact in Moscow as they were delivered close to Russia's borders - at an international pro-democracy conference in the Lithuanian capital of Vilnius. Kremlin officials will also be concerned that Washington is increasing its criticism before the St Petersburg Group of Eight summit in July.

Mr Cheney said: "America and all of Europe . . . want to see Russia in the category of healthy, vibrant democracies. Yet in Russia today, opponents of reform are seeking to reverse the gains of the last decade. In many areas of civil society - from religion and the news media to advocacy groups and political parties - the government has unfairly and improperly restricted the rights of the people.

"Other actions by the Russian government have been counter-productive and could begin to affect relations with other countries. No legitimate interest is served when oil and gas become tools of intimidation or blackmail, either by supply manipulation or attempts to monopolise transportation. And no one can justify actions that undermine the territorial integrity of a neighbour, or interfere with democratic movements."

The US vice-president did not elaborate but was clearly referring to this winter's Russia-Ukraine gas dispute and to warnings from Gazprom, the gas giant, that it might develop new markets in Asia and North America if European Union states restricted the company's plans for investment.

Mr Cheney was also expressing concern about Russian involvement in territorial disputes in Georgia, where the government accuses Moscow of supporting the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

He said "a return to democratic reform" would bring Russia international respect. He added Russia had a "choice to make" and that no one believed Russia was "fated to become an enemy". He pledged to raise the questions of Georgia, Ukraine and other neighbours at the G8 summit. "We will make the case clearly and confidently that Russia has nothing to fear and everything to gain from having strong, stable democracies on its borders."

Mr Cheney's comments provoked strong reactions in Moscow. A Kremlin spokesman said the speech was "incomprehensible" and "highly subjective".

The remarks could complicate US efforts to win Russian backing for a tough United Nations resolution on Iran's nuclear programme.

Mr Cheney was speaking to east European leaders, including nine presidents, among them Georgia's Mikheil Saakashvili and Viktor Yushchenko of Ukraine. Russian officials were conspicuously absent.

Mr Cheney praised east European states for the progress in building democracy.

Additional reporting by Daniel Dombey in London and Neil Buckley in Moscow