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Putin Defends Schroeder's Gazprom Nomination

By AFP

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President Vladimir Putin on Tuesday defended Russia's gas policies and the controversial nomination of Germany's ex-chancellor Gerhard Schroeder to gas giant Gazprom's board of directors.

Schroeder is chairman of the board of directors of Russian state oil giant Rosneft and in early February he was also nominated to serve on the board of Russian state energy giant Gazprom.

His close friendship with the Kremlin strongman and lucrative business dealings with Russia have for years been reluctantly tolerated at home.

But as war clouds gather over Ukraine, Schroeder is increasingly seen as a potential liability to new chancellor and fellow Social Democrat Olaf Scholz.

"Today many in Europe are worried whether Russian gas will be supplied to Europe in general

and to Germany in particular," Putin said at a news conference with the visiting German chancellor, replying to a question about the nomination of Schroeder, 77, to the board of Gazprom.

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If he is elected, "then there will be an honest person whom we respect, and both Germany and the Europeans will have a person who can both exert influence and receive information directly from Gazprom," Putin said. "We can only rejoice."

Schroeder's appointment would be "a natural thing," he added, recalling that the former chancellor — in office between 1998-2005 — was also currently on the shareholders' committee of Nord Stream.

Putin hosted Scholz in the Kremlin as the two leaders discussed the Ukraine crisis, but energy was also on their agenda.

Gas prices in Europe have soared this winter, with some accusing Moscow of limiting gas deliveries to put pressure on Europe amid tensions over Ukraine and to push through the Nord Stream 2 pipeline.

Putin defended the controversial pipeline that was completed last year but is awaiting the green light from the German regulator.

The pipeline has been criticized by some Western countries as a geopolitical weapon.

"This is one of the largest infrastructure projects in Europe, intended to significantly strengthen energy security on the continent and to contribute to the resolution of" environmental problems, the Russian president said.

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