**Russia shuts oil pipeline in trade dispute**

Russia halted oil exports to Europe via Belarus yesterday as a bitter trade dispute escalated, renewing concerns that Moscow is bent on pursuing aggressive energy diplomacy.Taps were turned off on pipelines to Poland and Germany but the European Commission said there was no immediate risk of shortages in either country because of ample stocks in refineries.The commission was also investigating whether the supply was cut on another branch of the 2,500-mile pipeline feeding Slovakia, Hungary and the Czech Republic.

A spokesman for Andris Piebalgs, the European energy commissioner, said: "We have contacted the Russian and Belarussian authorities and demanded an urgent and detailed explanation for this interruption."
Andrei Sharonov, Russia's deputy trade minister, said Moscow had been forced to suspend crude oil exports via the Druzhba (Friendship) pipeline after disruptions he blamed on Belarus."We view this situation as force majeure," he told Russian television. Transneft, the Russian state pipeline operator, also accused its neighbour of siphoning off 79,000 tons of oil destined for Europe since the weekend.

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Moscow was last night preparing to receive a Belarussian delegation for urgent talks on the dispute, which last week saw Belarus slap a transit tax on Russian crude in response to a Russian decision to impose export duties on crude oil that Belarus buys from Russia.The row came days after Belarus had narrowly averted a threatened cut-off of Russian natural gas supplies by agreeing to a demand by the Russian monopoly Gazprom that Minsk pay double last year's price for imported gas.The disruption to Russian oil supplies once again highlighted concerns about European energy reliance on Russia, a year after a pricing dispute with Ukraine briefly affected EU imports of Russian natural gas.

Last January Georgia accused Moscow of sabotage after gas blasts on Russian pipelines cut off supplies to Georgia and Armenia. Russia dismissed the remarks as "hysteria".Russia moves about a fifth of its oil exports, about 1.2 million barrels a day, through Belarus: 18 million a year are supplied to Poland and 22 million to Germany.The dispute is rooted in Moscow's frustration with Alexander Lukashenko, the Belarussian president.Russia has traditionally seen Belarus as an ally, acting as a military buffer between it and Nato.The inefficient, Soviet-style economy in Belarus and Mr Lukashenko's popularity has depended heavily on subsidised Russian energy, but the Kremlin has grown impatient at supporting his regime while receiving insufficient return. Mr Lukashenko, whose repressive tactics have made him a pariah in the West, has refused President Vladimir Putin's offer to incorporate his country into Russia as a province.At the weekend he vowed that Belarus will defend its sovereignty."Never and nowhere did I say that we would hand over our country to be broken up and incorporated into another one," he said.