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Ukraine's Yanukovich to visit Moscow on gas

Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich will visit Moscow later this month for talks with Russia's Dmitry Medvedev in a new attempt to solve a row over the price Ukraine pays for supplies of Russian gas, his aides said on Friday.

Yanukovich will go to Moscow on September 24.

"There are a wide range of issues to be discussed that include those relating to gas and others," Iryna Akimova, Yanukovich's economic adviser, told Reuters on the sidelines of an international conference in the Crimean resort of Yalta.

Ukraine wants Russia to agree to a review of a January 2009 gas deal which it says has saddled it with an exorbitant price for gas supplies and obliges it to import more than it requires.

Russia has refused, saying a new deal can be worked out only if its former Soviet ally joins a joint customs union or lets Russian gas giant Gazprom buy into its gas transport system.

The gas row, which harks back to a deal signed between Ukraine's oil and gas firm Naftogaz and Russian gas giant Gazprom before Yanukovich came to power, has seriously rebounded on relations between Russia and the ex-Soviet republic.

Speaking at the Yalta European Strategy conference, Yanukovich made clear Ukraine intended to stick with its strategy of cutting back Russian gas imports.

"We have submitted an order to Gazprom for 27 billion cubic metres for next year," he said, adding that Ukraine had a program aimed at "cutting gas consumption by 5 billion billion cubic meters a year."

The volume of gas which Ukraine intends to import is an important element in the dispute with Russia.

Gazprom says the 2009 deal, which Ukraine is now challenging, provides for gas imports by Kiev of 33 billion cubic meters.

Gazprom has said that Ukraine is obliged to pay for this quantity of gas irrespective of whether it imports it or not.

Yanukovich said he was confident a solution to the gas row would be worked out.

But he ruled out any major political concessions to Moscow, specifically on joining the Russia-led customs union which is incompatible with reaching an association agreement with the European Union.

"The issue of Ukraine joining the (Russia-led) customs union is not on the agenda," he told the conference.

He said talks were still continuing with Russia on upgrading Ukraine's gas pipelines. "We have been and will remain strategic partners with Russia. I am sure a solution will be found," he said.

(Additional reporting by Yuri Kulikov; Writing By Richard Balmforth; Editing by Jon Boyle)