
BP bosses to meet Putin tomorrow.

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The current and future heads of BP are to meet the Russian president, Vladimir Putin, tomorrow amid mounting expectation that the Kremlin will make moves to buy out the 50% stake in TNK-BP now in the hands of local Russian investors and hand it over to one of the state energy firms, such as Gazprom or Rosneft.

Lord (John) Browne, the chief executive, and Tony Hayward, his designated successor, will visit Moscow at a time of great uncertainty for foreign and private firms in the Russian energy sector. Gazprom is already negotiating to buy its way into TNK-BP's Kovytko gas export project, having earlier taken a stake in Shell's Sakhalin gas scheme.

A TNK-BP spokesman declined to comment on what subjects would be under discussion at the meeting, but Bob Dudley, its chief executive, told the Guardian at the weekend that while he expected the private investors Alfa and Access/Renova to stay on at TNK-BP it "should not be seen as a huge problem" if a Russian state-owned oil or gas enterprise stepped in. Yet he also put out a formal statement on Tuesday in which he denied that any shake-up in the ownership structure was on the cards. "I feel it necessary to explain again that all speculation about a possible change of TNK-BP's shareholding structure is not true," he said.

Lord Browne and Mr Hayward can be expected to try to gain a better understanding of the Kremlin's intentions for TNK-BP, which is 50% owned by the UK oil group. It is believed that BP is deliberately playing a conciliatory line on Kovytko and the wider group ownership issue, rather than the more confrontational approach taken by Shell on Sakhalin, which was deemed by many to be counter-productive.

Gazprom has already said that it could buy into TNK-BP if a proposal is made, while Alfa and Access/Renova have repeated before they do not want to sell out when a "lock-in" period ends this coming December.

The potential for Rosneft to move in was enhanced earlier this week when it raised a record \$22bn (£11.2bn) from eight foreign banks, allowing it to buy further assets from the bankrupt estate of Yukos, the company founded by oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovsky, who is now in a Siberian jail. The mainly state-owned Rosneft, which acquired many of its assets from Yukos after a controversial auction, will direct some of the new cash raised from banks such as Barclays, Morgan Stanley and ABN Amro, towards making bids for Yukos refineries.
