

Name: Alert ID: TMML2024035470482 Germany's former chancellor Gerhard Schröder was yesterday at the centre of damaging allegations of sleaze over his decision to accept a lucrative job with Russia's biggest company. Opposition MPs joined forces to denounce Mr Schröder - who last week confirmed that he was to become chairman of state-controlled Russian giant Gazprom's North European Gas Pipeline company. Mr Schröder was accused of bringing German politics into disrepute and of "cronyism" and "corruption". Mr Schröder signed the controversial pipeline deal for a \$6bn (£3.4bn) gas link between Germany and Russia under the Baltic Sea with Russia's president, Vladimir Putin, just two weeks before leaving office. The former chancellor yesterday rejected the criticism and announced that he would take legal action over reports he would be paid between €200,000 (£134,000) and €1m a year. Those figures are "much too high", Mr Schröder told the Süddeutsche Zeitung newspaper. "For me it is a thing of honour to help with the pipeline project," he was quoted as saying. "I supported the project politically in the past because I think it makes sense." In May Mr Schröder abruptly announced he was holding Germany's general election a year early. He stepped down last month when his Social Democrat party joined a grand coalition under Angela Merkel. Mrs Merkel's Christian Democrats have called on Mr Schröder to resign. "He's done grave damage to Germany's reputation. Unless he quits, his job will look like a reward for his efforts [as chancellor]," Christian Wulf, the minister-president of Lower Saxony, told Bild yesterday. "It stinks. It looks to me like sheer cronyism," said Richard Bütikofer, the co-leader of Germany's Greens. Even Mr Schröder's old cabinet colleague Peter Struck, Germany's former defence minister, expressed doubts. "I wouldn't have done it," he said. Unlike Britain, Germany does not have a code of conduct preventing ex-ministers from immediately joining industry once they have left government. But yesterday several MPs said Germany should now consider emulating Britain to prevent - as one put it - the "whiff of corruption". In Mr Schröder's seven years in office he failed to criticise Russia's human rights record in Chechnya, praising Mr Putin as a "thorough democrat".