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Crimea is left without power

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Electricity supplies from mainland Ukraine to Crimea were completely severed overnight on 21 and 22 November. This happened because the four transmission lines which had been used to supply between 70% and 80% of the electricity used in Ukraine were all blown up by unidentified perpetrators (no one has claimed responsibility for it).

Both Kyiv and Moscow have so far refrained from escalating the situation. Russia wants electricity supplies to Crimea to be resumed as soon as possible. In turn, the government in Kyiv does not seem to be interested in a long-term energy blockade of Crimea, since this could lead to Russian increasing economic pressure on Ukraine. This situation will deepen the divisions among Ukrainian politicians and the general public over the strategy to be adopted with regard to Moscow, which may additionally weaken the position of President Petro Poroshenko and strengthen that of the radical groupings.

The background of the incident

Around 900–950 MW of electricity was supplied daily from mainland Ukraine to Crimea; the region's daily demand is around 1,000–1,200 MW. Supplies for 2015 are regulated under an agreement signed in December 2014 by Ukraine's Ukrinterenergo and Russia's Inter RAO. The transaction was combined with supplies of Russian electricity to Ukraine. When the supplies to the peninsula were cut, the Russian side announced a state of emergency in Crimea and introduced rationing of electricity supplies for most customers; water and heating supplies have also been reduced in some parts of the peninsula.

It took several repeated attempts to damage the transmission lines, which proves that this was a planned action. Two unsuccessful attempts to damage the transmission lines were made as far back as October (the perpetrators have not been identified). All four lines were damaged as a consequence of blowing up the transmission towers overnight on 19 and 20 November and 21 and 22 November.

Ukrainian activists – i.a. Crimean Tartars, Ukrainians from Crimea, volunteer battalions, and Maidan activists – are opposed to electricity supplies to the peninsula. Since 20 September, they have continued a civil economic blockade of Crimea in protest against the Russian government's repressions in Crimea and the Russian occupation there. The blockade has resulted in the withholding of overland goods transportation from Ukraine proper to Crimea. Although the leaders of the blockade have not claimed responsibility for blowing up the transmission lines, shortly after the explosions they announced they would block repairs of the infrastructure until political prisoners in Crimea were released. On 21 September clashes

were seen between participants of the blockades and the Ukrainian National Guard sent to protect the repair teams. The protesters were successful in preventing the repairs from going ahead. Repairs could only be commenced on 24 November, following talks which the Ukrainian president and prime minister held with the Tartar leaders, and they covered only one line (which supplies electricity to a part of Kherson Oblast and Crimea Titan plant owned by the Ukrainian oligarch Dmytro Firtash located in the peninsula).

It is difficult at present to indicate those responsible for the acts of sabotage. It was most likely an action of Ukrainian radicals who would like to see a tough policy adopted towards the occupied peninsula. However, these moves fit in with the internal political struggle in Ukraine, and they were aimed at weakening the position of President Petro Poroshenko. Furthermore, it cannot be ruled out that diversionary actions plotted by the Russian secret services intended at discrediting Ukraine have taken place. However, this scenario would cost Russia too much when compared to the potential effects.

Reaction from Russia

The Kremlin refrained from commenting on the transmission line explosions immediately after the incident. However, on 24 November, the Russian minister for energy, Alexander Novak, announced that Moscow was considering withholding supplies of Russian coal in response to electricity supplies to Crimea being cut off. A day later, President Vladimir Putin claimed that the explosions would not have been possible without Kyiv's tacit consent. At the same time, the Russian press claimed that Russian coal supplies to Ukraine had been withheld. Moscow wishes to see electricity supplies to the Crimea resumed as soon as possible, and this still moderate reaction shows that the Kremlin is making efforts to avoid escalating the conflict, focusing rather on informal pressure and expecting Ukraine to make the positive moves.

In turn, the fact that the power supply lines were blown up in territory controlled by Kyiv has been used by the pro-Kremlin media to point to the Ukrainian government's incompetence and lack of reliability. This is expected to strengthen the dislike of the Ukrainian government among residents of Crimea and Russia. Despite all this, it cannot be ruled out that the worsening social problems in Crimea combined with the shortage of electricity supplies will also lead to growing disillusionment with Russian rule in the peninsula.

The incident has not served the Russian government well, since it has revealed that Crimea, which was annexed by Russia in March 2014, still relies on Ukraine for electricity and water supplies, and Moscow has been unable to remove this dependence despite its declarations and efforts. The energy bridge running through the Kerch Strait, the first part of which is planned to be brought into operation in December 2015, is expected to offer some degree of independence from Ukraine. According to optimistic Russian estimates, these supplies, along with the energy generated in the peninsula, will satisfy around 70% of power demand in Crimea. As promised by Moscow, Crimea will become completely independent from supplies from mainland Ukraine in May 2016, after the second part of the energy bridge has been put into operation.

The consequences for Kyiv

The fact that the power supply lines were blown up has put the Ukrainian government, and especially President Petro Poroshenko, in an uncomfortable position, both in relations with Russia and on the domestic political scene. The Ukrainian government does not want another field of conflict with Russia to be opened. For now, the most important issues Kyiv wants resolved are: regulating the situation in eastern Ukraine (armed incidents have intensified there over the past week), the future of the Minsk Agreement (formally, it expires at the end of 2015), Russian gas supplies, the repayment of the Russian loan (US$3 billion in December, which Ukraine does not agree to), the implementation of the free trade agreement with the EU (which Moscow is opposed to).

At the same time, the government in Kyiv is under increasing public pressure and is being criticised for its overly soft policy with regard to Moscow. To ease the internal pressure, President Poroshenko and Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk met with Crimean Tartar leaders. Furthermore, on 23 November, upon a motion by the president the government adopted a regulation banning the export of goods from Ukraine proper to Crimea (i.e. in fact sanctioning the already existing situation resulting from the civil economic blockade).

Ukraine may make attempts to capitalise on the existing situation to strengthen its position in negotiations with Russia. Little progress has been made so far in repairing the damaged transmission lines, and the work has been carried out to a limited extent as a consequence of the continuing civil blockade. However, this may also be evidence of behind-the-scenes bargaining between Moscow and Kyiv. Nevertheless, a continuing energy blockade of Crimea in the longer term would lead to a significant increase in tension in the conflict and an unpredictable reaction from the Russian government.