

Kosovo Blackouts Anger Serbs

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Power company's move to cut off electricity from households that won't pay is causing uproar.

Lela Simonovic, from Batuse, a mainly Serb village near Fushe Kosovë/Kosovo Polje, near Pristina, has been without electricity for two months.

In a candle-lit room, she and her two children huddle next to a stove into which she piles wood to keep warm.

Simonovic is furious with Kosovo's main power supplier, the Kosovo Energy Cooperation, KEK, which she says is punishing Kosovo's minority Serbs.

"We are being discriminated against," she said. "Someone is going to drop dead from cold before the electricity comes on again."

The blackout in the Simonovic household is the result of a drive by KEK to cut off electricity to homes or settlements where bills have not been paid for months or even years.

KEK says it is not intending to punish anyone, merely to enforce rules among its costumers.

Palokë Berisha, a KEK spokesperson, said, "We are offering contracts to people who haven't paid their bills under which they can pay off their debts gradually."

Simonovic says this is no comfort.

"How can I pay while none of us is working?" she asked. "How are we going to get the money when 90 per cent of people in this village are unemployed?"

Many other inhabitants of Kosovo's Serbian enclaves view the electricity cut-offs as a discriminatory policy, targeting the Serbs in particular.

"They simply want to expel us," a Serb inhabitant in Lipljan/Lipjan, 20 kilometres south of Pristina, told IWPR. "They want to force us out of our homes."

The complaints are endorsed by top Serbian politicians. In mid-January, Serbia's president, Boris Tadic, told Soren Jessen-Petersen, head of the UN Mission in Kosovo, UNMIK, that the power cuts were destroying what remained of the Serbian community.

In a letter to the Danish UNMIK chief, he said cutting off electricity in the middle of winter "amounts to a form of silent ethnic cleansing".

In spite of the chorus of Serb complaints, both Jessen-Petersen and the KEK management remain firm in the view that users of electricity must pay up - or get cut off.

Berisha said the power company took no account of people's ethnic background when deciding to keep power flowing or not. "In KEK we classify people as ones that pay their bills and ones that don't," he said.

While the Serbian media and politicians have concentrated solely on the plight of ethnic Serbs in Kosovo, many members of the majority Albanian community suffer exactly the same problems.

Ali Aliu, 37, lives with no power in a suburb of Pristina with his family of six.

With a wife and several small children, aged three to eight, Aliu is the only one in the family with a job.

But the 120 euros he earns each month as a night watchmen for a veterinary farm is not enough to even start paying off his debts to KEK.

"KEK has told me I have run up debts of 1,400 euros in the last few years," Aliu said. "But I am in no position to pay such sums on my small wage."

Aliu says cases like his warrant special treatment and that his family deserves humanitarian aid rather than having their electricity cut off.

While members of both communities in divided Kosovo insist they are "special cases", the fact is that KEK faces a huge problem over non-payment of power bills.

According to KEK's figures, power users owe the company almost 190 million euros. Most of the defaulters are not Serbs but Albanians and KEK says only five or six of the 140 areas to which power has been cut are inhabited by Serbs, such as Lipljan and Fushë Kosovë/Kosovo Polje.

Nevertheless, the international administration in Kosovo is keen that the Serb minority should not feel isolated over the issue.

On February 9, Marek Nowicki, the Kosovo Ombudsman and his Serb deputy, Ljubinko Todorovic, toured Batuse, Priluzje and other Serb villages that are experiencing power failure.

Nowicki was sympathetic. "As a result of the power shortages, living conditions in these areas are on the edge of humanitarian catastrophe," he said. "We must find an urgent solution to ensure these people have power."

Milan Djekic, representative of the Serbs in Fushë Kosovë/Kosovo Polje agreed, adding that he had no wish to exaggerate the ethnic dimension in the dispute.

"Politicising the issue and claiming power cuts are done on an ethnic basis is only contributing to the cause of a few politicians, not to the people of Batuse," Djekic said.

Apart from demanding payment, KEK's solution to the ongoing problem of unpaid bills in Kosovo lies in persuading costumers to sign contracts that regularise their status.

"Contracts would give them obligations but also rights and some certainty about how much their electricity is going to cost," Craig Jenness, Jessen-Petersen's advisor on minority issues, said on January 26.

"I am hopeful that they are beginning to understand, through this fog of politicisation, that that's the real issue," he added. "Unfortunately, there are some people, whether deliberately or not, who are encouraging them not to sign the contracts."

Another Serb in Fushe Kosove/Kosovo Polje, who did not want to be named, told IWPR that the Serb community was caught between two dilemmas.

"On the one hand there is pressure on poor Serb villagers to sign contracts with KEK and on the other there is pressure from Belgrade not to sign," he said.

The Serbian authorities, he explained, opposed any recognition, however symbolic, of a local Kosovo institution in case it undermined Serbia's claim to the territory.

John Ashley, managing director of KEK, agrees. "There are Serbs who are interested in signing the contracts who have approached us," he said. "But they are scared to do so because they will be accused of accepting Kosovo's institutions."

Back in Batuse, Lela Simonovic says UNMIK officials, KEK representatives and even the Serbian politicians are all full of empty talk.

"The bottom line is that no one cares about what happens to people here," she said. "I would pay for the power I have used if I could but I just don't have the money."

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