

Kyrgyzstan: Officials Furious Over Power Cuts

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Outraged Kyrgyz officials take power firm to court for cutting electricity to government ministry building.

An electricity firm has caused indignation amongst Kyrgyz officials by cutting power to the offices of the ministry for labour and social welfare after it failed to pay its bills.

Officials at the ministry – more used to the Soviet system where state suppliers would have given government bodies rather more leeway – reacted angrily to the move, and on October 5 filed charges against Severelektro at the Bishkek city court.

They claim the decision to cut off power to the building between September 24 and 29 was illegal and have demanded 2.5 million US dollars compensation.

But the partly privatised Severelektro has defended its actions, the latest of a series of such moves against state clients this year. It says the ministry – which is in charge of subsidising electricity costs for vulnerable citizens including war veterans and the elderly – failed to cover these costs for ten months and as of September 23 had run up a debt of 350,000 dollars.

Public statements by the company have emphasised that it is the ministry itself that is being targeted, and not those who receive the subsidised power.

“Our ministries are used to a situation whereby if they are state institutions, they don’t have to pay on time,” Severelektro press secretary Natalya Orlova told IWPR, justifying the drastic measures. “Today, this is the only effective method of dealing with non-payers.”

Ashingazy Israilov, labour and social welfare ministry’s official, says work at the central offices was completely paralysed during the week-long power cut.

“All the computers were turned off, which affected urgent documents. The entire database was inaccessible. Without electricity, financing of prosthetic dentistry and payment of optical services to war invalids was stopped,” he told IWPR. “Our employees had to run to state institutes next door and beg for permission to work on their computers.”

Ministry officials disagree about the situation regarding money owed to Severelektro.

Natalya Kim, head of the ministry’s finance department, said the ministry pays its bills on time and has not violated its contract.

And Minister for Labour and Social Welfare Roza Aknazarova, agrees. “We do not have any debts for the building. This is an illegal action on Severelektro’s part,” she told IWPR.

It is not the first time this year that Severelektro has taken drastic measures in response to non-payment of bills.

In February and March, it cut power to the ministry of health, which had run up debts of 50,000 dollars on electricity used by hospitals and other medical facilities.

And on March 14, public transport in Bishkek ground to a halt for half a day when power was cut to the city's trolley bus depot. The fire service and National Guard buildings were also plunged into darkness for several hours.

Several jails and penal colonies in the Chui region had their power cut after the prison administration ran up a debt of 166,000 dollars.

And the Alaarcha state residence, home to President Akaev, narrowly escaped the same treatment after a debt of 16,000 dollars was hurriedly paid off.

Some debtors have responded by using unconventional methods to try and put pressure on Severelektro. When the company cut electricity to the ministry of defence building and a number of military units, including a missile regiment, the ministry announced its decision to begin using reserve officers employed by the company.

Severelektro's firm tactics are clearly unpopular with its debtors. Amongst other observers, attitudes are mixed.

"On the one hand, we are trying to work in market conditions and Severelektro's actions are quite understandable and justified. On the other hand... cutting off electricity to strategic objects is dangerous," said Ainura Umetova, head of the Institute for Strategic Studies.

Parliamentary peputy Adakhan Madumarov is less sympathetic. "It is idiotic to get debts by this method. It is a gross violation of the law," he said. "Severelektro will soon go as far as to turn off electricity during a surgical operation."

But company bosses stand by their actions, insisting that they reserve the right to put pressure on the ministry to pay up.

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