

Tirana Returns To The Dark Ages

Author: [Alban Mitrushi](#)

The power stations are old, the distribution system outmoded and electricity is regularly switched off for up to ten hours a day: is it any wonder Albanians refuse to pay their electricity bills? Poor rainfall and corrupt industry management are only comp

Albanians associate the start of winter with electricity failure. This year, the weather has been warm, but there have still been power cuts to remind people of the changing season.

Almost the whole of the country has been dark for over two weeks now. In Tirana the electricity has been off for six to ten hours a day. In other towns, and especially in the countryside, the situation is even worse.

Power cuts are an old problem for Albania. In the late 80s and the early 90s things were very bad. There are several explanations, but the three most important are: obsolete hydropower stations (which make up more than 95 percent of the total output of the country's electricity), the poor state of the distribution network and the huge increase in electricity consumption.

Albania is heavily dependent on its hydropower stations. Built on the Drini River in the north-east during the communist era, they are old and poorly maintained due to lack of investment.

The distribution network is equally obsolete and it cannot cope with the dramatic increase in electricity usage. The old installations were originally designed to provide power for lighting and some domestic appliances (rare in Albania in communist times).

Since the fall of the regime in 1990, almost every family has purchased at least a washing machine, a refrigerator and a TV set. The final blow to the network came when electric heaters replaced traditional heating with wood-burning stoves.

There is also a financial dimension to the problem. In the wake of the move towards a market economy, the government stopped subsidizing the industry. Initially everybody thought that the price increase would discourage people from using electricity for heating, but in fact the opposite turned out to be the case. People are still using electricity for heating, but now they are not paying their bills.

According to the Albanian Electric Corporation (KESH), almost 40 percent of the total electricity consumption is not being paid for. The government has been powerless to stop this and nowadays most people regard not paying their electricity bills as normal, reasoning that the prices are high and the service poor, so why bother paying?

On the other hand, KESH asserts that unpaid bills are making them bankrupt and that they cannot afford to invest more money to improve the production and distribution network.

Almost every government since 1990 has made electricity and water supplies their priority. Despite investments made by several donors, including the Italian and Swiss governments, the World Bank and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, the results have been minimal.

Lack of rain has made things even worse this year. According to KESH, the level of water in the hydropower

stations' reservoirs is at an all time low, and the situation will deteriorate if it does not rain very soon.

Bad management is also rumoured to be a factor. According to the Tirana independent daily Koha Jone, KESH exported big quantities of electricity abroad last spring, hoping for more rain to make up supplies during the rainy season. The paper also alleges that senior KESH officials benefited from the exports and bidding procedures for the maintenance of the hydropower stations and the distribution network.

Koha Jone's story appears to have some substance. The Minister of Public Economy and Privatization, Yulli Bufi, who was premier in 1991, lost his position in the last government reshuffle two weeks ago following newspaper allegations that he sold a range of industries off at greatly reduced prices (including one cement factory which went for 10,000 dollars).

Now his name is all over the papers, and even senior figures and deputies from his own Socialist Party have accused him of corruption. The State Prosecutor's office admits that he is being investigated, although no action has been taken as yet.

The newly appointed premier, Ilir Meta, has also sacked the director general of KESH and appointed his own advisor for energy, Farudin Hoxha, a former minister and one of the most well known experts in this field, in his place. In Hoxha's first interview he promised that the situation will improve soon and that more senior KESH staff will be sacked.

The changes in KESH management and the importing of electricity have improved things in Tirana. KESH maintains that hospitals, schools, public buildings and most of Tirana will have more electricity. People are still buying candles, however, fearful that changes at KESH will not be enough.

In the meantime, the future looks dark. The new millennium is getting closer and while most people around the world are preparing to celebrate in style, Albanians look likely to be celebrating in candlelight.

Alban Mitrushi is operations officer for the International Organisation for Migration in Tirana and an IWPR associate.

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