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Skolkovo Technology University Partners With Energy Firms

By Howard Amos

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Skoltech president Edward Crawley, center, with Fyodor Opadchy, deputy chairman for the System Operator of the United Energy System, at the signing ceremony Wednesday.

Skolkovo Institute of Science and Technology signed an agreement with four energy companies Wednesday, a move that could help speed up the modernization of Russia's power network and boost electricity exports to China.

The exact form of co-operation between MRSK Holding, En+Group, the Energy Forecasting Agency, UES and the fledgling technology university is undetermined, but it will probably involve an exchange of expertise and financial support for Skolkovo Institute of Science and Technology, or Skoltech.

New technology is particularly important for Russia's aging power distribution system, said Edward Crawley, the president of Skoltech and a professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

"This is an old system, and it's straining under the load," he said. "There need to be significant investments in the next decade or so to improve the efficiency of the distribution network and to control the grid more effectively."

Russia is known for its wastefulness. The country squanders about one-third of the energy it uses, equal to the amount consumed by Britain every year, according to the International Energy Agency.

The introduction of sophisticated technologies, such as smart-grid systems that respond with more flexibility to the needs of consumers, could also help Russia ramp up its electricity exports to China, said Artyom Volynets, chief executive of billionaire Oleg Deripaska's En+ Group.

Harnessing the hydroelectric potential of eastern Siberia, Russia has increased electricity exports to its southern neighbor in recent years, and the cross-border trade still has enormous potential, Volynets said.

RusHydro, the state-owned hydroelectric power producer, will soon be recapitalized by the government with an injection of billions of dollars. The money is earmarked for investment in the Far East's electrical generation industry.

"Thanks to the technology that we will develop with Skolkovo Tech," said Volynets, "we believe that in several years time you will be able to wake up in Beijing, turn on the kettle and drink wonderful Chinese tea made using electricity from [Russian] hydroelectric stations."

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