

Kiev Asks Ukrainians to Use Less Electricity Amid Threat of Blackouts

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KIEV — Ukraine's new energy minister pleaded with industrial and domestic consumers to use less electricity as hard frosts led to a sharp drop in gas stocks and low coal stockpiles, making more blackouts likely.

Volodymyr Demchyshyn on Thursday asked for a reduction in evening electricity consumption by 15 percent.

"Please, take it seriously. We expect reductions in electricity consumption even today. If we see consumption fall ... I promise to appeal [to the regulatory body] to stop the outages," the minister told the government press service.

He also asked industrial companies to switch to working at night, promising attractive tariffs if they do. Shortages on the electricity grid have caused some outages across parts of eastern Ukraine and in the capital Kiev.

Ukraine consumed a record high volume of gas from its limited storage on Dec. 2 due to hard

frosts, gas transport monopoly Ukrtransgaz said.

Weather forecasters expect relatively mild weather in mid-December and this could reduce gas consumption.

Ukraine uses gas to produce electricity but has been forced to switch to coal or fuel oil after Russia suspended gas flows.

However the national electricity company, Ukrenergo, said Tuesday that coal reserves at thermal power plants stood at 1.3 million tons, around 65 percent lower than in December 2013. It said five plants only had enough coal to last up to another four days.

Mired in a power crisis caused by a separatist conflict in industrial eastern regions that has shut down mines and rail links for transporting coal, Ukraine has said it may now depend on Russia for both coal and electricity to make it through the winter.

A spokesman for Ukrtransgaz said 132.7 million cubic meters of gas were drawn from underground storages on Tuesday versus an average of around 100 million per day last week.

Company data showed that the volume of stored gas has fallen more than 17 percent to 13.8 billion cubic meters since Kiev started pumping gas on Oct. 20 for heating in cold season.

Ukraine has been left without flows from Russia since mid-June due to a pricing dispute and unpaid debts.

After months of talks, the two sides reached an agreement in October, and Kiev said Wednesday that it planned to make a pre-payment for 1 billion cubic meters of Russian gas by Thursday.

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