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Crimea Blackout May Speed Up Launch of Russian 'Power Bridge'

By Joanna Kozlowska

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A customer visits a grocery lit with candles due to a power cut, in Simferopol, Crimea, Nov. 22, 2015.

Russia may speed up its construction of a "power bridge" supplying electricity to Crimea after the peninsula was plunged into darkness Sunday, as unknown perpetrators blew up two pylons carrying power lines from Ukraine, the Kommersant newspaper reported Monday.

Russian authorities declared a state of emergency after nearly 2 million Crimeans were left relying on generators, with the peninsula's Russia-appointed Prime Minister Sergei Aksyonov branding the destruction of the pylons "a terrorist act."

"Crimeans will not be brought to their knees ... or spoken to in the language of blackmail," he was quoted as saying by the TASS news agency on Sunday.

He added that Ukrainian electricity providers, on whom the peninsula currently depends, could expect to lose access to the Crimean market as the territory is integrated into Russia's

“unified” power grid, the RIA Novosti news agency reported Sunday.

“If the governing entities of Ukraine think they don't need the [Crimean] market, then they are going to lose it forever. Just like it happened with food imports,” he said.

In August, Russia began laying a power cable along the bed of the Kerch strait, which separates Crimea's Kerch Peninsula from the Taman Peninsula in Russia's southern Krasnodar region.

The first two out of four projected power lines were to be launched into operation before the end of the year, supplying electricity from mainland Russia, Russian Energy Minister Alexander Novak said Friday, Kommersant reported.

The ministry is planning to complete the construction of the “bridge” by 2018, and expects its capacity to exceed the peninsula's projected energy needs by 45 percent, the paper added.

The Crimean prosecutor general, Natalya Poklonskaya, was quoted by TASS as saying that a criminal case would be opened over the destruction of the electricity supply. Ukrainian nationalists are suspected to have been involved.

Ukraine's own power supply was also affected, with parts of the southern Kherson region left without power and “40 percent of the Kherson and Nikolayev regions at risk of shortages,” Kommersant quoted Ukraine's Energy and Coal Minister Vladimir Demchishin as saying.

A senator representing the peninsula in Russia's Federation Council told RIA Novosti on Monday that retaliatory measures, including halting coal exports to Ukraine, “could not be ruled out.”

“I cannot rule out a link between [the perpetrators] and the authorities in Kiev,” Sergei Tsekov said.

“But Kiev is dependent on us too. We supply coal to five or six thermal power stations in Ukraine, which they cannot do without. For now, we will hold off on any retaliatory measures, but we hope Ukrainian authorities will use their power and put new pylons in place. They could do it in a day,” he added.

The pylons were first attacked on Friday, with explosions downing two lines and damaging two others in Ukraine's Kherson region. The following night, the remaining two were blown up, cutting all power to the peninsula.

A group called the Civil Blockade of Crimea, which includes many Crimean Tatar activists, prevented Ukrainian officials from conducting repairs following the explosions on Friday, the Reuters news agency reported Sunday. However, Civil Blockade later denied involvement in either attack, the report went on to say.

Civil Blockade leader Lenur Islyamov said Monday on Ukrainian television that the group would not allow repair works to go ahead before 11 of its activists who had gone incommunicado on Friday, and are thought to have been detained by Ukrainian forces, were released.

A survey conducted Nov. 13-16 by the Levada Center, an independent Russian pollster, saw 87 percent of respondents say Crimea should be part of Russia, as compared with 73 percent in August this year, the Kommersant newspaper reported Monday. Only 3 percent thought the peninsula should belong to Ukraine.

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