

## Abkhazia energy independence

The prospect of large-scale repair work on the Inguri hydroelectric station, crucial for power supplies to both Georgia and Abkhazia, have raised questions about the neighbouring territories' energy security.

Relations between the two territories have been extremely sensitive since Abkhazia broke free of Georgian control in the 1990s and declared independence. Russia recognized Abkhazia in 2008, but Georgia still claims sovereignty.

Specialists warn that the hydropower plant, called Inguri in Georgia and Ingur in Abkhazia and operational since 1978, is badly in need of repair. This would involve major project that risks putting extra stress on the fragile partnership.

At a height of 271.5 metres and 800 metres long, Inguri has one of the world's largest concrete arch dams. This is located on the Georgian side, as is the water reservoir and part of the diversion tunnel. The power station building, four near-dam installations and the other part of the tunnel are on the Abkhazian side.

"At the moment, the Inguri hydroelectric power station is one of the few connecting links between Georgia and Abkhazia. ... In other areas, cooperation between the parties to the conflict is completely absent," said Livny. "I do not see any other future for Georgia and Abkhazia, but to communicate directly and solve problems together."

Repairs and reconstruction to Inguri will be hugely expensive, and there are also questions on how to eliminate the energy losses and provide for alternative power supplies while any work is ongoing. This in turn creates energy security risks for both sides.

In 2014, international donors funded the large-scale rehabilitation of electric and hydro-mechanical equipment as well as the strengthening of the main arch dam. These repairs were done step-by-step, allowing the plant to continue functioning.

Currently, almost half the volume of water passing through the tunnel - 10 out of 22 cubic metres of water per second - is lost. But to assess and repair even the most damaged section, which is 300 metres long, the entire power station needs to be shut down.

"The operation of the hydroelectric power station should be stopped and the tunnel discharged for three to three-and-a-half months to assess the state of the damage and conduct necessary research and construction works," said David Sharikadze, head of the energy department at Georgia's ministry of energy. "During this time, the most damaged section should be repaired."

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This means that Abkhazia and Georgia will not only have to pay for repairs but also find the resources to purchase alternative sources of energy for these months. For more extensive repairs, the plant would have to suspend operations for much longer.

"The situation this winter has clearly shown that both sides need to invest in repair," Livny said. "It may well be that temporary problems with the electricity supply and awareness of the gravity of the situation will encourage the parties to decide to jointly invest in the repair of the hydroelectric power station. And this will be great."

"It is quite possible that we will soon return to the issue of [complete] repair of the joint strategic facility, otherwise there could be power failures," state minister for reconciliation and civic equality Paata Zakareishvili told IWPR.

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