

TBILISI : Georgia and Russia lose - but who wins?

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The Georgian natural gas supply system has broken down just as a severe winter freeze threatens the country. Since the initial round of accusations and rhetorical jabs traded between President Saakashvili and Russian authorities, the tone of the remarks has calmed down slightly although the two sides still differ in their opinions as to why the gas lines were cut. Reasons range from the economic to the political. One thing, however, that nobody doubts is that this disruption was no accident. What many are trying to do now is determine whose interests this subversive act served.

President Saakashvili has directly blamed Russia for the action, which according to him was designed to punish Georgia for its Western tendencies as well as to warn it away from making any future decisions that would be unfavorable to Russia - in particular calling for the removal of the Russian peacekeepers from the conflict zones. It has also been suggested that the pipeline sabotage was related to Russia's desire to take control of Georgia's main gas distribution network.

Such direct allegations greatly irritated Moscow. Georgian analyst Sandro Tvalchrelidze told Sarke Magazine that Russia's central administration did not really benefit from this action, and that many other forces and factions exist in Russia - many who cannot be controlled by the Kremlin. Some have blamed the Russian special services, others the Chechen separatists and so on, the Georgian newspaper Akhali Taoba writes.

The Georgian opposition has suggested that President Saakashvili's premature praise of Georgia's energy gains last Thursday played a role in bringing about the event. Just days before the power system was plunged into chaos, the president delivered a speech extolling Georgia's energy supply achievements, something which - according to the opposition's theory - irritated Russia to the point where it decided to take action and prove Saakashvili wrong.

At this point, the conspiracy theories are diverse and wide-ranging. Predictably, Ossetian separatists in Tskhinvali support a version which holds that Georgia is responsible for disrupting its own energy supply while some political and economic analysts have mentioned the possibility of Iranian or even U.S. involvement. According to one version reported in Akhali Taoba, America blew the Georgian gas line in order to make sure, once and for all, that it would not be sold to Russian Gazprom - a development which many see as a threat to American interests in the region.

A minor scandal was created after a U.S. State Department official stated that, to encourage regional cooperation, Armenia would be supplied with Azeri natural gas, via the Georgian distribution system. This fact was quickly denied by Yerevan, Baku and Tbilisi. Azerbaijan would never provide Georgia with anything which could benefit Yerevan, and Tbilisi has said that the amount of gas being supplied through the Azerbaijani line is not even enough for Georgia itself. For its part, Yerevan claims that it is using its own natural gas reserves and has cut exports to Georgia to pad its own energy supplies.

Georgia, unfortunately, does not have any kind of natural gas reserve

system. The Georgian Energy Minister Nika Gilauri was dispatched to Iran where he struck a barter deal to receive an alternative supply of fuel. Iran will supply Georgia with natural gas via Azerbaijan's Karadaghi-Tbilisi pipeline in the winter and Georgia will pay Iran back with electricity in the summertime, Akhlai Taoba reports. However this contact with Iran was negatively evaluated by some of Georgia's more Western-oriented leaders such as Republican David Usupashvili, who called deepening economic ties with Iran a political mistake.

In spite of the supply disaster and Saakashvili's harsh statements, speculation that Georgia will sell its main pipeline to Russia is still ongoing. Parliament's Democratic Front faction has labeled State Minister for Economic Reforms Kakha Bendukidze a lobbyist for Russian interests in Georgia and has consequently called for his dismissal; however another opposition leader Zurab Tkemaladze - of the New Rights Opposition - supports the idea of selling the pipeline to Gazprom. Everybody who has an opinion concerning this issue claims that their position is based solely on patriotic motives. Meanwhile in Tbilisi it is still snowing, and there are many regions in the country where people have neither natural gas nor electricity nor, in many cases, money. For them, finding the culprit in the gas crisis has taken a back seat to finding heat.
