

Georgia's energy crisis reflects volatility of entire Caucasus.

By MIKE ECKEL

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Georgia's president proudly told his nation earlier this month that it was fully prepared for the winter, and he pledged uninterrupted power for the small, U.S.-allied Caucasus Mountain country, which had suffered years of crippling energy crises.

"For the first time in 15 years, Georgia this winter has its electric power guaranteed without deficit," Mikhail Saakashvili told a meeting of government ministers, nearly two years to the day that he was inaugurated as president.

"This is a historic achievement."

Five days later, explosions in southern Russia ruptured a major pipeline carrying gas to Georgia, cutting supplies nationwide. Then winds downed a major transmission line, plunging millions of Georgians into the dark as bitterly cold temperatures and an unusually heavy snowfall gripped the country.

The sudden energy crisis underscored the volatility and fragility of the Caucasus, a strategically vital region where tense politics turn on oil and gas, where Russia is scrambling to retain a foothold and where the West is closely watching.

Saakashvili, a former opposition leader, has built close ties with Washington at the same time as he has worked to distance his country from Moscow.

After last weekend's blasts on the pipeline in a Russian border region near Chechnya, which Moscow blamed on sabotage, he held Russia accountable and accused it of dragging its feet with repairs.

Energy Minister Nika Gilauri echoed the president's anger at Russia on Saturday, saying that Moscow's heavy-handed attitude was pushing Georgia further out of its sphere of influence. He accused Russia of deceiving Georgia about how the repairs to the pipeline have been progressing.

"Russia is a very unstable partner," Gilauri told The Associated Press.

"During the past week, the Russians have not only not given us gas, but they have lied to us.... This is an entirely political question."

>From Czarist times to the Soviet collapse, Russia was the imperial master of the Caucasus _ from the northern regions where Chechnya is located, to the south, where Armenia remains heavily dependent on Russian military and economic largesse.

With the arrival of Western oil companies eager to tap the vast carbon resources of Azerbaijan and the Caspian Sea, the Caucasus has emerged at the center of strategic economic as well as political rivalries.

The United States has embraced Georgia, training its military to serve in Iraq and, along with European nations, taking active part in efforts to resolve the status of Georgia's two breakaway regions _ Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Western countries, as well as Russia, are also searching for a solution to another so-called "frozen conflict" _ Nagorno-Karabakh, an ethnic Armenian enclave just south of Georgia whose disputed status sparked a six-year war between Armenia and Azerbaijan around the time of the Soviet collapse.

Many observers argue that Nagorno-Karabakh's limbo has hindered the entire region's development. Add to that Western doubts about the stability of Chechnya and the rest of the North Caucasus, across the border from Georgia, where small bands of Islamic militants skirmish frequently with Russian forces.

Now the Georgians have turned to Iran as an alternative to Russian gas supplies _ a development that cannot make Tbilisi's Western partners comfortable as they seek to isolate Tehran over its alleged nuclear weapons program.

Niko Orbelashvili, an economist and Georgian political analyst, said Georgia had no choice but to deal with Iran, given what he said was Russia's meddling.

"Russia is looking to own the energy infrastructure for the entire Caucasus," he said. "What else were we supposed to do?"

Ghia Nodia, who heads the Tbilisi-based Caucasus Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development, predicted Russian-Georgian relations would suffer only further this year, in particular if Georgia's parliament votes as expected next month to expel Russian peacekeepers from South Ossetia.

"There are no good prospects for Russia-Georgian relations," Nodia told the AP
