

Green Campaigners Oppose Georgia's Hydropower Drive

The Georgian government is enthusiastically pursuing hydroelectricity as a way of becoming self-sufficient in energy. However, environmentalists say the various dam projects under way will do severe damage to the ecosystem and are urging the authorities to look for alternatives.

With more than half its territory covered by mountains, Georgia is an ideal location for water-driven power stations. The first hydroelectric plant was built in 1898, and the Soviet government built the flagship 251-metre Inguri dam in 1978. With an output of 5.5 billion kilowatt hours (kWh), this is still a major source of electricity for the country.

A total of 66 hydropower stations are currently in operation in Georgia, although most are small in scale. Fifteen others are either at the planning stage or under construction. Despite this, Georgia struggles to provide power consistently all year round.

Official figures show that Georgia generated 10.4 billion kilowatt hours (kWh) of electricity last year. Of the total, 8.3 billion kWh was hydropower – 5.5 billion kWh from the Inguri dam alone – and the rest was generated by power stations fuelled by imported natural gas.

In winter, when reservoir levels have fallen to their lowest level, Georgia is forced to import a significant amount of electricity. Last year, Russia supplied 607 million kWh and Azerbaijan 184 million.

Murman Margvelashvili, director of the Institute for Energy and Sustainable Development, told IWPR that over-reliance on foreign energy suppliers was far from ideal.

“When you find yourself in a difficult situation and come to depend on a certain country, that country could use the situation to its advantage,” he said, in a veiled reference to Russia, with which Georgia has a poor relationship because of the former’s backing for Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

The Georgian government hopes a series of new projects can address the electricity deficit. On September 16, construction officially began on the Nenskra dam project in Svaneti, a mountainous region in northwest Georgia. Once completed in 2021, the plant will generate 1.2 kWh annually, still only a fraction of the output from the Inguri scheme, also located in Svaneti. Some electricity production will take place from 2019. The Nenskra dam will be 130 metres high, about half the 270 metres of the Inguri dam.

“The Nenskra hydropower plant will become the foundation of our country’s energy security,” Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili said at the launch ceremony.

He noted that this was the first large-scale hydroelectric project begun since Georgia became independent more than two decades ago.

“Most importantly, it will provide an alternative to importing electricity over the winter, and it will ensure that our energy system becomes more robust and self-sufficient,” Garibashvili.

The one billion US dollar project is being financed by the Georgian government and South Korea’s K-Water, with the work being done by Italian construction firm Salini Impregilo.

The Nenskra project has met fierce opposition from environmental campaigners and local residents.

Nino Chkhobadze, a former environment minister who now heads the Georgian branch of Friends of the Earth, recently told reporters that the Nenskra project could lead to increased humidity and temperature changes, as well

as more of the landslides that are already common in mountainous regions.

Chkhobadze warned that the development risked destroying a unique ecosystem, including a species of trout listed in the Red Book, a register of threatened plants and animals.

“This project will affect the whole ecosystem of Svaneti, not just one small gorge,” she said. “In the past, the construction of the Inguri power station brought about changes, but now the ecosystem is sort of stabilising itself. Another intervention of this kind could have catastrophic consequences.”

Objections from locals and environmentalists have so far stalled a third major project in Svaneti. Begun in 1979, the Khudoni scheme remains in limbo despite the government’s repeated efforts to revive it. If completed, Khudoni, with a 202-metre dam and 2.2 billion kWh annual generation, will be larger than Nenskra, but still smaller than the Inguri plants.

Energy Minister Kakha Kaladze has championed the scheme, arguing that it will both boost national power production and help regenerate Svaneti. (See [Georgian Energy Scheme Faces Stiff Opposition](#).)

Although resumption of the work on the Khudoni dam has not yet been agreed, local residents staged a protest in September at which they accused the authorities of failing to think through the consequences.

Margvelashvili told IWPR that despite the desirability of becoming a self-sufficient energy producer, this was a distant prospect, since demand was growing faster than the potential supply from new schemes.

“Total energy independence is impossible any time soon,” he said.

Opponents of the Nenskra project are likely to cite environmental problems associated with similar hydropower schemes elsewhere in Georgia.

Landslides that caused several deaths in the Daryali gorge in May and August 2014 have been blamed on construction work on a power station, although the authorities have denied any connection.

The Dariali project was already controversial as it was located within a designated national park.

Shota Buchukuri, who heads a local NGO called Stepantsminda, claims that the Dariali Energy company began working on the plant in 2011 without obtaining official permission.

“Under Georgian law, building within a national park area is prohibited. When the story came out – thanks to conservationists – the prime minister issued an order annulling national park status for the area, even though this kind of legal decision can only be taken by parliament,” he said.

Buchukuri said work in the Dariali gorge had been dangerous right from the start.

“Geologists, including local experts, produced several reports showing that the hydropower plant presented a serious threat, and that was confirmed last year with... a landslide that killed several people, including workers from the plant,” he said. “Geologists say there are several more points on the glacier where landslides are possible. The lower Dariali gorge and the beginning of its upper part is threatened. One can’t play games with such processes.”

A hydroelectric project in the northwestern Racha-Lechkhumi region faces similar objections from campaigners. A recent report by the Green Alternative group predicted that if the Namakhvani power station was built there, it could cause serious soil erosion and landslides.

The report also claimed said the residents of 14 villages would have to be resettled to make way for a reservoir.

Officials say that the risks are overblown, and that all infrastructure projects come at some cost.

Tornike Kazarashvili, project manager at the Georgian Energy Development Fund, said the disruption posed by the planned Namakhvani scheme had been greatly exaggerated.

“A maximum of 15 families, 13 of whom have already agreed, will have to be resettled,” he told IWPR.

“The climate is changing, there’s no two ways about it and no one disputes it,” he said. “You can either do a little harm to the environment and have electricity, or you can live in a cave and have a pristine environment.”

Although there has been some interest in developing solar power in Georgia, Kazarashvili said that the technology was still too expensive to make it economically viable.

However, he noted that work was ongoing to build Georgia’s first ever wind power farm, near the town of Gori. It should be operational by next year.

Kazarashvili said that power provided by these wind turbines would be used to address the country’s wintertime energy deficit, adding that further wind farms were planned.

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