

Russian gas supplies to EU dive overnight

PHILIPPA RUNNER

06.01.2009 @ 09:16 CET

Russian supplies of gas to the EU via Ukraine dived by 70 percent overnight from Monday (5 January) to Tuesday Ukraine says, with Bulgarian consumers told to turn off gas stoves after an emergency government meeting.

Gazprom has begun pumping gas to the EU via Ukraine at just 92 million cubic metres a day compared to 270 million cubic metres the day before, Ukraine state gas firm Naftogaz said.

"We do not understand how we will deliver gas to Europe," Naftogaz spokesman Valentin Zemlyansky told newswires. "This means that in a few hours, problems with supplies to Europe will begin."

Russian gas stopped flowing to Bulgaria, Greece, Macedonia and Turkey at around 3:30 am Sofia time on Tuesday, with the Bulgarian government holding an emergency meeting at 7:00 am and urging people to switch to alternative heating sources.

Bulgaria - where temperatures stood at minus seven degrees Celsius on Tuesday and are forecast to hit minus 15 this week - relies on Russia for almost all its gas, while running coal and nuclear power plants as well.

"We are in a crisis situation," Bulgaria's economy ministry said in a statement.

The sudden supply drop marks a sharp escalation in the 2009 gas crisis, putting it on



Bulgarian consumers have been told to switch to alternative heating supplies (Photo: wikipedia)

an equal footing with the 2006 gas crunch when Russian levels also dived by 200 million cubic metres overnight.

Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin had on Monday instructed Gazprom to cut Ukraine's EU-bound gas by a smaller amount - 65 million cubic metres - to cover volumes allegedly stolen by Ukraine.

"Cut it now," Mr Putin told Gazprom CEO Alexei Miller live on Russian TV, amid promises to boost EU supplies via smaller pipelines in Belarus and Turkey instead.

A delegation of European Commission and Czech EU presidency officials is in Kiev on a fact-finding mission on Tuesday, with EU officials to also meet Gazprom staff in Berlin the same day.

A meeting of the Gas Co-ordination Group - bringing together EU member states, Russian and Ukrainian energy experts - has also been tabled for Friday in Brussels.

The commission has so far said it would not intervene in the dispute unless it affected EU consumers, calling it a "commercial" and "bilateral" matter for Russia and Ukraine.

Most EU states at a meeting of EU deputy ambassadors in Brussels on Monday took the same line, despite Lithuanian calls for the EU to help Ukraine in what Vilnius sees as Russian political bullying.

"It was repeated many times that this is a purely commercial dispute," Czech EU presidency spokesman Radek Honzak told EUobserver. "Lithuania does not speak for the European Union."

The gas row erupted on 1 January after Gazprom accused Naftogaz of not paying its 2008 bill and after Ukraine rejected a 150 percent price increase for 2009 gas deliveries.

The EU gets about one fifth of its daily gas needs from Russia via Ukraine.