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Left in the Dark: How Critics Are Using Blackouts to Undermine the Energy Transition

Article by Nina Tea Zibetti
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When a series of power outages hit Europe last year, the finger of blame was quickly – and falsely – pointed to an unlikely source: renewables. Blackouts are being used as a political tool to oppose the energy transition. But they can also become an opportunity for open discussions about energy infrastructure – a topic too often reserved only for technical audiences.

On 28 April, 2025, at 12:33 p.m., the Iberian Peninsula went dark. Electricity across Spain, Portugal, and a small portion of Southeast France was eventually restored, in some locations as late as the early hours of the next morning. Those hours were quickly immortalised through extensive coverage in both news outlets and social media. From groups of people gathered in parks and squares to rows of commuters walking along metro tunnels to reach the nearest exit, footage of the Iberian Peninsula blackout took the internet by storm.

Following the blackout, people were hotly debating their theories about the possible causes of these power outages: a rare atmospheric phenomenon, the consequence of European sanctions against Russia, or a cyberattack. Climate Action Against Disinformation (CAAD), a global coalition of non-governmental organisations committed to combating disinformation about climate change, monitored the spread of blackout-related narratives on social media. One narrative, CAAD found, especially gained traction: the claim that the Iberian Peninsula's ongoing transition to renewable energy was to blame for the blackout.

Social media accounts with tens or hundreds of thousands of followers across Europe and beyond amplified this narrative. On X, *Visegrád 24* – a Polish news aggregator known for spreading propaganda and fake news – posted to its 1.5 million followers: "Spain launched an experiment on April 16th to generate all power for the entire Iberian Peninsula only through renewable energy sources such as wind, solar and hydro. Today, their power grid collapsed." Another post by the far-right financial news blog *ZeroHedge*, linking to their article titled "6 Days After Celebrating '100% Renewable Power', Spain Blames 'Rare Atmospheric Phenomenon' For Nation's Largest Blackout In History" was viewed over 200 thousand times. Comments were ironically celebratory: "Congrats on hitting Net Zero!" said one X user.

Renewable energy sources were also widely cited in newspaper headlines about the blackout. The *Daily Mail*, less than two hours after the outage, published an article titled "Could renewable energy be to blame for huge Spain blackout? How outage struck days after country's grid ran entirely on green power for the first time". On the day after the outages, Spain's free English-language newspaper *Euro Weekly News* headlined "Spain's 100% renewable energy target followed by historic blackout – coincidence?"

"If someone is rushing to blame renewables before we have any idea whether or not they're actually to blame," says Philip Newell, communications co-chair of CAAD, "I think that's a pretty easy qualifier for disinformation." Crucially, the renewables hypothesis stuck with people. Polling conducted by CAAD a few months after the blackout found that 36 per cent of the Spanish public and 22 per cent of the British public identified "the electricity grid's excessive dependence on renewable energy" as one of the causes of the power cuts.

Culprit or scapegoat?

The narrative blaming renewables partly stemmed from early speculations that a lack of inertia in the Spanish electrical grid caused the power outages. In the context of an electrical grid, inertia refers to the energy stored in large electrical generators – such as conventional fossil, nuclear, and hydropower plants – which gives them the ability to momentarily continue providing power when the generator fails, as mechanical systems detect and remedy the failure.

Inertia is lower in electrical grids with high shares of renewable energy generation – such as in Spain, which in 2024 generated more than half of its electricity from renewable sources. This can make responding effectively and in time to changes in frequency more difficult, thereby posing risks to grid stability. According to a 2025 review, there are several strategies that electricity grids with high penetration of renewable energy sources can deploy to face this challenge. These include, for example, using energy storage devices such as batteries, or employing power electronics to emulate traditional generator stability – a system referred to as synthetic inertia.

Nonetheless, an early report by the Spanish government in June found that inertia levels were not lower than those recommended by the European Network of Transmission System Operators for Electricity (ENTSO-E). Commenting on the report after its release, energy analyst Ketan Joshi wrote that several conventional power stations – nuclear, coal, and gas – appeared to have failed to provide voltage control. Subsequently, a surge in voltage was confirmed to be the proximate cause of the blackout by the ENTSO-E Expert Panel's analysis, published in October 2025.

In other words, the outage was not caused by low inertia. A sharp increase in voltage triggered widespread protective shutdowns of generation and transmission assets, resulting in a system-wide blackout within approximately 30 seconds. This anomalous sequence of events makes the Iberian blackout the "first ever of its kind".

An expert panel is expected to deliver an analysis of the root causes of the Iberian Peninsula blackout by the first quarter of this year. In the meantime, Damian Cortinas, the chairman of ENTSO-E, says that, based on what has emerged so far, Spain's growing dependence on renewable energy did not play a role in triggering the April blackout.

Echoes in the EU

For the European Right, the Iberian Peninsula blackout presented an opportunity to discredit the energy transition at large. On 30 June 2025, months before the publication of ENTSO-E's factual report, German MEP Markus Buchheit of far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) sent a written question to the European Commission. In it, Buchheit claimed that the blackout "highlights the real risks of an energy transition driven by ideological dogma

rather than technical or strategic considerations". He urged the Commission to acknowledge that "a forced energy transition" endangers the member states' security of electricity supply and asked that current energy policies be revised to allow EU countries to "strengthen conventional energy sources, such as nuclear or gas".

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Buchheit was not alone in linking the Iberian Peninsula blackout to the energy transition. Austrian MEPs Georg Mayer and Harald Vilimsky, of the sovereigntist parliamentary group Patriots for Europe, asked the Commission whether it was "prepared to subject the targets of the Green Deal and of the 'Fit for 55' package to a substantive review in order to minimise risks to security of supply and to competitiveness, as well as the burden on European households, rather than rigidly sticking to ideologically driven targets".

"The Spanish blackout has essentially become a tool for the political forces that are against renewables to say that renewables cause blackouts, even though it's been proven that it wasn't actually renewables," explains EU parliamentary assistant and energy expert Jaume Loffredo. He says there is a risk that the memory of the Iberian Peninsula blackout might fuel anti-renewables campaigns for years.

"Simple answers"

The Iberian Peninsula blackout was not the only case in which power outages led to the spread of narratives critical of the green transition. In June, several neighbourhoods in the Northern Italian city of Turin suffered a series of blackouts. Over the weekend of June 13-15, thousands of citizens were left without power for periods ranging from minutes to more than ten hours. Iren, the company that manages electricity distribution in Turin,explained that the power outages were exacerbated by the summer heat. In particular, technical failures in the joints connecting the cables were responsible for about 80 per cent of the outages. The failures were made more likely by high ground temperatures, as well as the obsolescence of the infrastructure. Hotter weather also played a role in overloading the city's electrical grid as electricity demand increased with people turning on ventilators and air conditioning units.

In the summer months, higher temperatures due to climate change make the European electrical grid more vulnerable to power outages. A 2024 analysis by CORRECTIV.Europe found that the number of cooling-degree days – an index that measures days on which the average temperature is above 24°C, necessitating the use of artificial cooling systems – has increased across most of Europe, with countries in the south particularly affected. Between 2014 and 2023, the analysis shows, Malta and Cyprus experienced significantly more intense summer heat compared to the 1980s. This was also the case in countries like Italy, Spain, and Greece.

The outages in Turin gave way to different yet similar narratives to the ones circulating after the Iberian Peninsula blackout. In particular, citizens called into question charging stations for electric vehicles (EVs). On 18 June, the daily *La Stampa* featured a letter highlighting this concern: "The media repeatedly blamed the heat, the distribution network, and air conditioning," wrote a Turin resident. "I would like to draw attention to the charging stations for electric cars, which are increasingly present in the city." On Facebook, comments under an article by La Stampa regarding the blackout expressed similar worries. "What about green cars charging? Is no one thinking about that?" one of them read.

In fact, there is no indication that EV charging stations contributed to the Turin power outages. According to energy and policy expert Marine Cornelis, whose work focuses on just energy transitions, such narratives take hold when people are scared. "When we are exposed to blackouts, we need to think about where our energy comes from and what is happening to us," Cornelis explains. "We are dependent on something, and it's scary, it's extremely scary." She continues: "And when people are scared, they look for simple answers."

"Self-fulfilling prophecy"

Fear plays an important role in shaping the narratives surrounding blackouts. A 2023 report from the EU Disinfo Labanalysed how different actors in Germany used fears over the alleged threat of an imminent blackout to push back against the energy transition in the country. The report notes that Europäisches Institut für Klima und Energie (EIKE), Germany's most prominent climate-sceptic organisation, has been vocal in amplifying this narrative to discredit the energy transition. EIKE instrumentalises the fear of blackouts in line with a broader message of climate change denial: the energy transition is framed as unnecessary in the face of a problem that it claims is overblown.

EU Disinfo Lab found that the far-right AfD also played an active role in turning blackout fears into a political weapon. By collecting and amplifying unverified reports of alleged blackouts through initiatives such as the "Blackoutmelder" platform, AfD sought to create the impression of a systemic energy failure.

In the aftermath of the Iberian Peninsula and Turin blackouts, the EU Disinfo Lab's aim of alerting against "a rising hoax and conspiracy that risks becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy anytime a power shortage occurs" has taken on greater urgency. These cases also point to the dangers of social media information environments. "Social media companies like X, TikTok, and Facebook reward engaging content without any sort of information integrity safeguards," warns CAAD's Philip Newell. On these platforms, breaking news moments such as blackouts create "a race for virality" in which algorithmic amplification intersects with partisan rhetoric and propaganda. The effect is clear in the case of the Iberian Peninsula blackout: months after the event, CAAD's polling found that "seven in ten Spanish people and six in ten in the UK fell for at least one false narrative about the blackout causes."

Beyond the political instrumentalisation of blackouts by climate sceptics and critics of the energy transition, power outages are moments that can be harnessed for broader public discussions over energy infrastructure.

Information and participation

Addressing online disinformation is thus one piece of the puzzle. According to Newell, one solution is to treat disinformation spread via digital platforms by monetised social media accounts as a form of false advertising. “Governments all over the world protect their people from bad products and so regulators should treat social media the exact same,” Newell explains. “False advertising is illegal, and a lot of this is more or less just covert false advertising for the fossil fuel industry.” When polled by CAAD about the causes of the Iberian Peninsula blackout, a majority of UK and Spanish citizens favoured measures to control the spread of climate disinformation online to “ensure informed public discourse”. As Newell puts it, “Not only are the solutions possible, they’re popular.”

Beyond the political instrumentalisation of blackouts by climate sceptics and critics of the energy transition, power outages are moments that can be harnessed for broader public discussions over energy infrastructure. Cornelis explains that the rumours that emerge in the wake of electrical blackouts – like the ones in Turin – should be seen as opportunities to address people’s genuine questions about the energy transition. She continues: “Can we use these moments to ask: where does electricity come from? Why do blackouts happen? What role do electric cars play? Are more EVs a risk for blackouts?” People have concerns and uncertainties regarding the energy transition. These concerns, warns Cornelis, should not be dismissed – and neither should institutions communicate about energy and energy infrastructure in an overly complex manner. “The problem is that institutions are incapable of talking to people normally, as if they were sitting in a cafe,” she concludes.

Blackouts show that disinformation, fear, and mistrust of institutions all affect how people react to solutions proposed in the framework of the energy transition. But attitudes towards these solutions, including renewable energy, are also shaped by whether people feel a sense of agency. As horizontal approaches to energy production, such as renewable energy cooperatives, suggest, the energy transition can be a way to bring people together and empower communities. The promise of simply keeping the lights on is not enough to build majorities around renewables.

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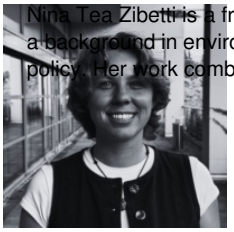

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