Italy urges central EU energy authority.

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Italian prime minister Romano Prodi has suggested there should be a central EU energy authority following energy blackouts over the weekend affecting millions of people in Germany, France, Spain and Italy.

The power loss halted hundreds of trains in Germany, created blackouts for an hour in the Italian regions of Piedmont, Liguria and Puglia and caused electricity loss in Madrid, Barcelona and Paris.

Austria, Belgium, the Netherlands and Croatia were also hit by the blackout which was thought to have originated in Germany and which affected around 10 million citizens - 5 million in France alone - on Saturday evening between 10 and 11pm CET.

German energy company E.On said that reports of power cuts started to come in soon after it shut down a high-voltage line over the Ems river in the north west of the country to allow a cruise ship to pass through safely.

"Such switch-offs have been undertaken repeatedly in the past without any problems," E.On said in a statement. "It is still unclear where and how the acute fault occurred half an hour after the switch-off. E.On is working flat out to obtain a detailed analysis."

Central authority?
The sudden power loss throughout Europe, sparked off by events in one country, have prompted calls for a centralised energy authority in the EU.

"My first impression is that there is a contradiction between having European networks but not having a central European authority," said Mr Prodi.

"We depend on each other without being able to help each other, without a central authority."

Italy already felt the electricity pinch earlier this year when an energy tiff between Russia and Ukraine lead to Rome having to take emergency steps and restrict energy consumption.

French energy company RTE said the problems in Germany had contributed to a massive imbalance in supply and demand across Europe.

"Such imbalances must be corrected immediately to avoid a complete meltdown in the European electric system," said the company in a statement.

Spiegel Online reports that German politicians have started accusing the country's energy firms of being too greedy to properly invest in networks.

Meanwhile, the weekend's energy blackout - the worst pan-European power loss in 30 years - is likely to strengthen Brussels' hand on energy reforms.

The European Commission is pushing to have an open EU energy market by mid-next year, arguing that this is the answer to Europe's energy security problems.

However, it is facing stiff resistance from member states reluctant to allow foreign takeovers of their national energy utilities or to bow to an EU-level regulator on power grids.

Brussels is currently locked in a protracted battle with Madrid over a German bid to take over Spain's main utility, Endesa, while a blocked Italian takeover of French firm, Suez, has also caused a bad atmosphere.

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