

“Gone in 30 Minutes” - Next on Europe’s Doomsday List: Collapse of Cell Phone Networks

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It’s not just heating that could be missing across Europe this winter: cell phones may be the next to go. That’s because if power cuts or energy rationing knocks out parts of the mobile networks across the region, mobile phones could go dark around Europe this winter according to the latest doomsday reporting from [Reuters](#).

While everyone knows by now that Europe’s chances of rationing and power shortages have exploded ever since Moscow suspended gas supplies, in France, the situation is even worse as several nuclear power plants are shutting down for maintenance. And the cherry on top: telecom industry officials told Reuters they fear a severe winter will put Europe’s telecoms infrastructure to the test, forcing companies and governments to try to mitigate the impact (i.e., more bailout demands).

The problem, as four telecoms executives put it, is that currently there are not enough back-up systems in many European countries to handle widespread power cuts, raising the prospect of mobile phone outages. Realizing that in just weeks Europe could be cell phone free, countries including France, Sweden and Germany, are scrambling to ensure communications can continue even if power cuts end up exhausting back-up batteries installed on the thousands of cellular antennas spread across their territory.

Alas, like with everything else in Europe, it’s too little, too late and Europe is facing a truly historic cell phone black out because while Europe has nearly half a million telecom towers, most of them have battery backups that last around 30 minutes to run the mobile antennas. After that they go dark.

One of the alternatives being discussed is pushing Europe back to communist era blackout regimes: In France, a plan put forward by electricity distributor Enedis, includes potential power cuts of up to two hours in a worst case scenario, two sources familiar with the matter said.

The general black-outs would affect only parts of the country on a rotating basis. Essential services such as hospitals, police and government will not be impacted, the sources said. And now, it appears that cell phones are considered essential too: the French Federation of Telecoms (FFT), a lobby group representing Orange, Bouygues Telecom and Altice's SFR, put the spotlight on Enedis for being unable to exempt antennas from the power cuts.

Enedis said it was able to isolate sections of the network to supply priority customers, such as hospitals, key industrial installations and the military and that it was up to local authorities to add telecoms operators infrastructure to the list of priority customers.

"Maybe we'll improve our knowledge on the matter by this winter, but it's not easy to isolate a mobile antenna (from the rest of the network)," said a French finance ministry official with knowledge of the talks.

Telcos in Sweden and Germany have also raised concerns over potential electricity shortages with their governments, several sources familiar with the matter said. Swedish telecom regulator PTS is working with telecom operators and other government agencies to find solutions, it said. That includes talks about what will happen if electricity is rationed. PTS is financing the purchase of transportable fuel stations and mobile base stations that connect to mobile phones to handle longer power outages, a PTS spokesperson said.

The Italian telecoms lobby was even more forceful, and told Reuters it wants the mobile network to be excluded from any power cut or energy saving stoppage and will raise this with Italy's new government. The power outages increase the probability of electronic components failing if subjected to abrupt interruptions, telecoms lobby chief Massimo Sarmi said in an interview.

Until a solution is reached, to save power, telecom companies are using software to optimise traffic flow, make towers "sleep" when not in use and switch off different spectrum bands, Reuters sources said. The telecom operators are also working with national governments to check if plans are in place to maintain critical services. In Germany, Deutsche Telekom has 33,000 mobile radio towers and its mobile emergency power systems can only support a small number of them at the same time, a company spokesperson said.

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