

Widespread protests against Swedish wire-tapping law

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With protests against Sweden's new surveillance law rising, the Justice Center (CFR) announced July 14 it would file a case against the legislation in the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR).

The bill permits the intelligence services to monitor telephone, e-mail and Internet communications that cross Sweden's borders. It was voted into law late on June 18, after a short delay forced by rebels from the government parties. Earlier that day, the proposal was sent back to the parliamentary defence committee where a number of token concessions were attached to the bill, which was enough to convince those MPs to vote in favour. The measure passed by 143 votes to 138, with 1 abstention.

From the beginning of June, groups on social networking websites and other Internet sites began organising opposition to the wire-tapping law. With limited coverage in the print media, it was largely as a result of blog postings that the issue was highlighted.

On the day of the vote, groups of protestors gathered outside the Riksdag (parliament) to voice their opposition. Some handed out copies of George Orwell's novel, *1984*.

The days in the lead-up to the vote saw ongoing manoeuvring within the governing coalition—the Alliance made up of the Moderate, Liberal People's, Christian Democratic and Centre parties—to convince their members to support the measure. A significant number of MPs, enough to tip the balance against the proposal in parliament, had expressed their intentions to vote against their own party to block the surveillance law. Karl Sigfrid, a Moderate Party member, expressed his concerns in an e-mail made public on the eve of the vote, stating, "Mass surveillance of Swedish citizens is a measure that is not proportionate to the problems Swedish authorities are expected to solve."

Members of the smaller Centre Party voiced concerns, forcing minor concessions from the government. These included the appointing of an "independent committee" to observe the activities of FRA (the National Defence Radio Establishment—the Swedish state's intelligence-gathering agency), as well as a civil liberties ombudsman to safeguard individuals' privacy.

Such cosmetic changes were able to persuade enough MPs to support the measure, but the measures passed still represent a severe threat to democratic rights. The intelligence services will still be given carte blanche to intercept any communication that crosses Sweden's borders without requiring a court order.

Swedish daily *Expressen* launched a protest letter on its website that readers could fill in and send to all parliamentarians who had voted against or abstained in the vote on the surveillance law. Just days after its launch, MPs had reportedly received 2 million e-mails, and by July 3, a total of 6 million had been sent. Sweden's total population is around 9 million people.

Many within the youth organisations of the Alliance parties have subsequently voiced their disagreement with the law. Niklas Wickman, leader of the Moderate Party's youth wing, threatened his resignation if the party refused to change its position.



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