

European governments in crisis over US spying revelations

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The latest revelations regarding the extent of US surveillance of world communications traffic has led to a chorus of protest and expressions of unease in the European media and political circles.

According to the information released last Friday by former CIA employee Edward Snowden, the NSA has collected vast amounts of information based on a global sweep of telephone and internet communication. So-called “heat maps” of the spying operation make clear that the NSA had no qualms about tapping the communications not only of countries it defines to be its enemies, but also those regarded as its long-term allies.

The NSA heat map published in the *Guardian* newspaper reveals that no less than 3 billion pieces of data were collected from individuals, institutions and businesses across the continent of Europe in the course of March 2013 alone. Every European state was subject to surveillance, with the continent’s biggest economy, Germany, subjected to the most scrutiny.

In editorials and statements Tuesday, European politicians and media outlets complained of the American surveillance operation, while at the same time defending the right of their own national governments to spy on the population at large.

The European Union commissioner responsible for data privacy, Vivianne Reding, is expected to raise the issue of the NSA espionage with American officials during the G8 summit this weekend in Dublin. A spokesman for the German government also said that German Chancellor Angela Merkel would broach the topic with US President Barack Obama, who is due to travel to Berlin directly after the Dublin summit.

US surveillance programs, justified on the basis of the “war against terror”, have been a contentious issue in Europe for a number of years. At the start of this year, the European Parliament debated a study produced by the Centre for the Study of Conflicts, Liberty and Security.

The study concluded that the renewal of the Foreign Intelligence and Surveillance Amendments Act by the US administration at the end of 2012 posed a “much graver risk to EU data sovereignty than other laws hitherto considered by EU policy-makers.”

The American FISA Act expressly authorizes targeting the communications and data of “foreign-based political organizations”—not just suspected terrorists or foreign government agents. One of the authors of the EU report declared that FISA was effectively “a carte blanche for anything that furthers US foreign policy interests”, legalizing the monitoring of European journalists, activists and politicians engaged in any issue in which the United States has a stake.

Previously the European parliament had also expressed its disquiet with the demand made by American intelligence agencies for extensive information on all European citizens attempting to enter the US.

Responding to the EU study at the start of the year, the US ambassador to the European Union, William Kennard, declared that the European parliament’s “fears of mass surveillance are unwarranted”. The latest revelations on the NSA spy program make clear that Kennard’s assurances in January were worthless.

Despite earlier concerns raised about the extent of US espionage operations, the official response from the European Union to the latest revelations has been low key. The topic was raised in the European parliament on Monday by a junior EU official—the Maltese commissioner for health and consumer affairs—who complained lamely in Strasbourg that the NSA Prism program “potentially endangers the fundamental right to privacy and the data protection of EU citizens”. He declared that data surveillance and the defence of the privacy involved a “fine balancing act,” and hoped that the scandal would not endanger the “special relationship” between the US and Europe.

The qualms expressed by European politicians about the extent of the NSA operation were echoed by European media outlets, many of which expressed their disappointment with the Obama administration for permitting the vast spying program. At the same time, a number of papers pointed out that the information gathered by the NSA could be used by the US state and companies to win advantages over business rivals.

Noting that all of the main companies whose servers were accessed by the NSA—including Google, Facebook, Yahoo, Apple and Microsoft—are American owned and have a global reach, the Spanish paper *El Periódico de Catalunya* writes that: “Not only does the Big Brother announced by George Orwell actually exist, in this age of information he has a series of increasingly sophisticated instruments at his disposition.”

The Big Brother theme was raised by many other European papers with the German *Süddeutsche Zeitung* titling its commentary on the NSA revelations: “Obama and surveillance—Orwell-President.”

In an initial comment on the scandal, the British *Financial Times* also expressed concern about the consequences of the US spying operations for international diplomacy and business interests.

In the meantime, however, a deliberate counter-offensive has been waged by commentators who have argued that the NSA surveillance operation was justified and necessary. Just one day after its critical commentary, the *Times* published two articles in which the respective authors argued that “It is the legitimate business of the state to try to keep tabs on the dark side of the internet” (Gideon Rachman), and that the “NSA is upholding, not subverting, the law” (Philip Bobbitt).

The main bourgeois Italian paper *La Stampa* also printed a comment Tuesday declaring that attempts to describe Snowden and fellow whistleblower Bradley Manning as heroes were entirely misplaced: “The soldier of Wikileaks and the computer specialist from the [current case] Datagate ... acted illegally to expose government programs that are legal until proven otherwise and which received the blessing of Congress.”

The fact is that European governments and media are all deeply compromised by their collaboration with the US intelligence services.

For over a decade European governments eagerly seized on the US “war against terror” to massively extend their own domestic surveillance operations. They were quite willing to co-operate with the US rendition programs and exchange information with American intelligence

agencies.

In Italy, secret service agents worked directly with their CIA counterparts to kidnap an Egyptian cleric Abu Omar living in Italy in exile. Moreover, Spiegel Online wrote on Monday: “Germany’s foreign intelligence agency, the BND, conducts various secret operations in tandem with the NSA, most of them concerning large-scale data collection”. In return, the NSA regularly passes on information to Germany’s security agencies.

The objections raised in European circles to the NSA operations are not due to opposition to the development of a powerful state apparatus aimed at suppressing political opposition. They are all engaged in such actions themselves. Rather, aside from immediate economic and geopolitical issues, there is a concern that the crudeness and openness with which the US state is assuming dictatorial powers over its people, is threatening to discredit the ideological framework of imperialist operations as a whole.

These concerns were most directly expressed in a comment by the German Justice Minister, Sabine Leutheusser-Schnarrenberger. Arguing that Germany in 1949 adopted a constitution based heavily on the freedoms assured by the American Constitution of 1776, she warns in the wake of the NSA revelations: “It is important to avoid the impression that the protection of basic rights is not being taken seriously enough.”

The American-led “war on terror” has been used to justify every manner of attacks on democracy and wars abroad. By invading country after country—including the current operation in Syria—the US and its European allies have postured as the champions of “freedom” and “democracy”. The Snowden revelations have further exposed these pretenses, with immense political implications in the US and in Europe.



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