

Catalan politicians' phones hacked by government-grade spyware

Alice Summers
24 July 2020

The phones of two senior Catalan politicians and at least two other pro-independence campaigners were hacked using “government-grade spyware,” according to a joint investigation by the *Guardian* and *El País*. The software, known as Pegasus and developed by Israeli cyber-espionage firm NSO Group, was used to tap the mobile phones of Roger Torrent, president of the Catalan parliament, and Ernest Maragall, former regional foreign minister, over a two-week period in April-May 2019.

The hacking occurred under the premiership of Pedro Sánchez of the Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE), which has been ruling since June 2018, now backed by the pseudo-left Podemos.

Two other pro-independence campaigners, Anna Gabriel and Jordi Domingo, also had their phones hacked. Gabriel is a former member of the Catalan parliament for pro-independence party Popular Unity Candidacy (CUP). She has lived in self-exile in Switzerland since fleeing Spain after being called before the Spanish Supreme Court to give evidence about her role in the 2017 Catalan independence referendum.

Domingo, a pro-independence activist, believes he may not have been the intended target of the cyberattacks, instead suspecting that the hacking targeted a well-known lawyer by the same name, who helped to draft a Catalan constitution.

NSO Group was long held by the San Francisco, US-based private equity firm Francisco Partners. Its spyware, which NSO says is sold “exclusively” to governments to “detect and prevent terrorism and crime,” infected the phones of its targets via the messaging platform WhatsApp. The hacking software’s operator places a WhatsApp call to the target, after which the device is infected with Pegasus—even if the target did not pick up their phone.

According to a US lawsuit by WhatsApp against NSO Group, Pegasus exploited an existing “vulnerability” in the messaging service, which could give the hackers access to everything on the target’s phone—emails, text messages and photos. The malicious software could also turn on the phone’s microphone and camera, enabling the operator to

listen to and watch everything their targets were doing.

The attacks against Catalan politicians are only the tip of the iceberg. WhatsApp estimates that 1,400 users had their phones breached in this way during the two-week period last year. Victims of the malware attacks included unspecified “senior government officials,” diplomats and human rights activists. Indian journalists, Rwandan dissidents and Moroccan human rights campaigners also allegedly were targeted. NSO Group software has been implicated in numerous anti-democratic spying operations, including targeting Mexican journalists, lawyers and opponents of then-President Enrique Peña Nieto in 2015–16.

The International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) is unequivocally hostile to the programme of the CUP and of the Catalan Republican Left (ERC) of Torrent and Maragall. The pro-capitalist, bourgeois-separatist agenda of the Catalan nationalists promoted a nationalistic programme to divide workers on the Iberian Peninsula. Their support for pro-austerity Catalan regional governments underlines their hostility to the working class.

But the spying and intimidation campaign against the CUP and ERC must be opposed. The phone-hacking is a brazen violation of democratic principles, establishing a repressive apparatus aimed fundamentally against the working class. It underscores that governments around the world are moving towards police-state repression in response to an upsurge of the class struggle.

Catalan parliament President Roger Torrent denounced the hacking attacks as being part of the Spanish state’s “dirty war” on its political opponents and pointed to the role of the PSOE government in these anti-democratic manoeuvres. “The [PSOE-Podemos] government we have now claims to be the most progressive that we’ve had historically,” said Torrent. “But these kinds of actions have happened under a PSOE government.”

Torrent and Maragall will take out legal action against former chief of Spain’s National Intelligence Centre (CNI), Félix Sanz Roldán, who headed the CNI when their phones were targeted last year. The CNI said in a statement that it

acted “in full accordance with the legal system,” but did not specifically comment on the use of Pegasus spyware.

The Spanish Interior Ministry denied involvement in the spying operations, telling the *Guardian* and *El País*: “Neither the interior ministry, nor the national police, nor the Guardia Civil [paramilitary police] have ever had any relationship with the company that developed this program and, as such, have never contracted its services.”

While the identities of those who spied on Torrent and Maragall remain unclear, the Spanish state’s denials cannot be taken at face value. These revelations come after vicious police repression in Catalonia since the 2017 independence referendum. Spanish police violently cracked down on voters in that referendum, wounding over 1,000 people as voters responded to police beatings at the polls with mass civil disobedience. Since then, Spanish courts have jailed nine separatist leaders involved in the referendum on trumped-up charges of “sedition.”

In 2018, it emerged that Spanish police spied on CUP officials for over a year, with officers monitoring CUP headquarters and those entering and leaving the premises.

Podemos, meanwhile, has postured as an opponent of these police-state measures; its leader, Deputy Prime Minister Pablo Iglesias, declared the use of the spyware “unacceptable in a democracy.” Podemos and the ERC have called for a parliamentary commission to investigate the spying as part of a broader inquiry into the so-called “sewers of state” and allegations of police corruption and media collusion.

This show of opposition is entirely cynical. Podemos has long supported the PSOE, under whose government the hacking attacks were carried out, and entered into coalition with it this January. In March, Iglesias was integrated into the Intelligence Affairs Commission, which directs, supervises and controls the activities of the CNI spy agency.

El País insisted that they would support electronic spying on legal political activity, as long as a judge approved it. “It is imperative to know whether the alleged espionage had a legal basis,” it wrote in an editorial which speculated that Torrent and Maragall might have aimed to “destroy the constitutional order, threatening the majority will of the citizens, using the aid of foreign powers with dubious democratic credentials, like Russia.”

The revelations of spying on Catalan officials is the result of a coordinated campaign by major European media outlets, revealing information gleaned from the operations of giant corporations and state intelligence agencies. Moreover, these revelations emerged suddenly in publications, like *El País*, that were vitriolically hostile to the Catalan nationalists during the 2017 referendum.

Other forces outside Spain’s borders are likely implicated

in the spying on Torrent, Maragall, and others via the Pegasus program. Spain, Saudi Arabia, Mexico, the United States, France and the United Kingdom have all been identified as users of Pegasus software. The scandal is being followed not only in these countries, but also in others, including India and Turkey, that were victims of NSO Group operations.

Last October, WhatsApp launched legal action in the United States against NSO Group after Francisco Partners sold its stake in the Israeli firm, alleging that NSO was responsible for a series of sophisticated attacks that violated US law in an “unmistakeable pattern of abuse.” In April, WhatsApp’s court filings alleged that NSO Group was “deeply involved” in hacking 1,400 users. WhatsApp claimed that servers controlled by NSO Group, and not its government clients, were vital to executing the phone tapping.

NSO Group’s defence argues that WhatsApp has “conflated” its actions with those of its “sovereign customers,” stating in its legal filing that “Government customers [make] all [the] decisions about how to use the technology.” Lawyers for NSO claimed: “If anyone installed Pegasus on any alleged ‘target devices,’ it was not [the] defendants [NSO Group]. It would have been an agency of a sovereign government.”

As US-European Union (EU) relations collapse amid mutual trade war policies and the COVID-19 pandemic, and war tensions mount in the Middle East, this case is emerging as a political football in the European ruling establishment. The anti-democratic record on the Catalan question of the Spanish bourgeoisie, backed by all the NATO powers, is a warning. Only the mobilization of the working class can halt the growing resort to state spying and police-state policies, which are supported by the entire ruling elite.



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact