

Eastern Europeans fuel fight for Internet freedoms

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An internet activist wearing the "anonymous" mask is interviewed by the media during a protest against the Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement, or ACTA, in Zagreb, Croatia, Saturday, Feb. 11, 2012. Several hundred gathered to denounce ACTA agreement. (AP Photo/Darko Bandic)

(AP) -- Eastern Europe's tradition of political revolt has met the digital age. This time it's not communists or food shortages fueling fury, but an international copyright treaty that opponents say threatens freedom on the Internet.

A grassroots protest movement erupted last month in Poland and spread quickly across the former Eastern Bloc and beyond. The growing opposition against the Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement, or ACTA, has raised questions about the fate of the treaty, which is important to the governments of the [United States](#) and other industrialized economies.

There have been street protests across Eastern Europe, attacks on government websites in the Czech Republic and Poland, even a heartfelt apology from a Slovenian ambassador who signed it and then decried her act as "civic carelessness."

In a region where people remember being spied upon and controlled by oppressive communist regimes, the treaty has provoked fears of a new surveillance regime.

The pact aims to fight intellectual property theft - like fake Gucci handbags and violations of pharmaceutical patents. But it also targets online piracy - illegal downloads of music, films and software - and calls for measures that critics say would bring surveillance of Internet users.

"Most of the people who have gone to the streets are young and don't remember communism themselves, but Polish society as an entity remembers," said Jaroslaw Lipszyc, the president of the Modern Poland Foundation, an organization devoted to education and developing an information society.

"In Poland [freedom of speech](#) is of special value, and there is a history of fighting for it."

Lipszyc, a prominent ACTA opponent, sees his work today as a natural extension of the same struggle for free expression that prompted his own family to illegally print anti-communist essays in their basement during the 1980s.

Eastern European countries, even those now in the European Union, are still much poorer than the West, and among critics are people who fear losing access to free - sometimes illegal - entertainment. With joblessness in Poland at 12.5 percent and the monthly minimum wage at just 1,500 zlotys (\$465) pre-tax and average wages at 3,605 zlotys

(\$1,130), many say they can't afford 20 zlotys (\$6.30) or more for a movie ticket.

"People became furious," said Katarzyna Szymielewicz, director of Poland's Panoptykon Foundation, which campaigns for privacy rights in a context of modern surveillance and opposes ACTA. "We have a history of rising up against injustice."

ACTA went from being an obscure international agreement to a household term in Poland in mid-January when the government said it would sign it within days. Civil rights organizations like Panoptykon were outraged because the government failed to consult with them first.

Szymielewicz said they got word out on Twitter and other social forums, and soon Internet activists in Poland and abroad - some with the group "Anonymous" - waged attacks on [government websites](#), including those of the prime minister and parliament, leaving some unreachable for days.

The anger drew on a broader frustration in society, especially among youth, over a lack of jobs and a sense of alienation from the political process.

"This was the last drop that made it a flood," Szymielewicz said. "The Internet is a space of freedom - something people feel really belongs to them - and suddenly the government interferes with this space."

Poles and others were also primed to act because many had been following the opposition in the United States to two similar initiatives, the Stop Online Piracy Act and Protect Intellectual Property Act - known popularly as SOPA and PIPA. American lawmakers shelved those bills after massive pressure that included a one-day blackout by Wikipedia and other Web giants.

Days later, Poles took to the streets across the country against ACTA - activism that spread to Berlin, Sofia, Bucharest and many other cities where thousands rallied last Saturday. More rallies are planned for Feb. 25.

Opponents are also angry that the treaty was negotiated for almost four years in secret without input from civic rights groups, giving them the impression that it is a backroom deal made on behalf of powerful industries.

The United States and other proponents of ACTA deny that it will be invasive. They argue that protecting intellectual property rights is needed to preserve jobs in innovative and creative industries. The online piracy of movies and music costs U.S. companies billions of dollars every year.

Washington also vows that individuals would not be monitored online and that ACTA would instead target companies that profit from using pirated products like software.

"Civil liberties would not be curtailed," says the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative, which signed ACTA in October.

But opponents say the agreement is worded so vaguely that it is unclear what would be legal and what not. Some people fear they could be prosecuted for, say, mixing home video footage with a Lady Gaga song and putting it on YouTube to share with friends.

"Because it's unclear what is allowed, people will limit their creativity," said Anna Mazgal, a 32-year-old Polish civil rights activist. "People could censor themselves out of fear because it's so vague."

Many opponents also fault ACTA for putting commercial values like profit above rights like freedom of expression.

"It's not surprising that European citizens are taking to the streets in the thousands to protest against an agreement that puts rightsholders' private economic interests ahead of their fundamental rights," said Gwen Hinze, the international intellectual property director with the Electronic Frontier Foundation, a San Francisco-based group that defends civil liberties on the Internet.

All the uproar has put ACTA's supporters on the defensive, at least for now.

The agreement has already been signed by the United States, Japan, South Korea and about 20 other countries.

But some governments which have signed it now say they won't ratify it, including Poland, Slovenia and Bulgaria. The Czech Republic says it needs to analyze the matter before deciding. A key test will come in the summer when the European Parliament will vote on it.

Germany says it supports ACTA as a way of defending [intellectual property](#) rights, but has promised to clarify doubts about it before signing it. Thousands protested last Saturday against ACTA across Germany, where data protection has long been a widespread concern and officials have clashed with Internet giants such as Google and Facebook over privacy issues.

The Slovenian ambassador to Japan, who signed it in Tokyo last month on behalf of her nation, later apologized, saying she had not understood at the time how it could limit freedom "on the most significant network in human history."

"I signed ACTA out of civic carelessness," Helena Drnovsek Zorko wrote on her blog.

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