

French bill to expand spying powers is criticized

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The French government, which was among the most vocal critics of U.S. spying practices, is now coming under fire for trying to expand its own digital surveillance capabilities.

A law making its way through parliament would give French intelligence services access to telephone and Internet usage data that would let them locate and follow a target of a terrorism investigation in real time. The law also expands the number of agents allowed to access this information to include those from the finance and budget ministries.

In addition, the law would give agents access not just to meta data about users from website hosts but allow them to seize content stored on websites and in clouds. In at least some cases, agents could request information not just to combat terrorism but also to fight industrial espionage.

Critics say the law expands the government's power without also expanding the checks on that power. They claim it could dissuade digital businesses from setting up in France.

Both houses have already passed the bill but in different versions. The Senate was examining it again Tuesday in an attempt to reconcile the differences.

The law may come as a surprise to some because of France's recent indignation at revelations the U.S. swept up more than 70 million French

telephone records. But France is traditionally on the other side of the issue: cooperating with allied governments on anti-terrorism operations.

France has long struggled to walk the line between its image of itself as the country of human rights and its need for tight security laws amid waves of terrorism on French soil. The country has a robust security apparatus, honed during terrorist attacks in the 1980s and 1990s.

In fact, parts of the new law simply make permanent powers that had been temporarily granted and repeatedly renewed since the Sept. 11 terror attacks in the United States.

The government has defended the bill as necessary to modernize and streamline intelligence-gathering powers in the face of increasingly sophisticated tactics by its enemies. It noted that the National Commission for the Control of Security Interceptions, which ensures the legality of communications surveillance, and the French National Commission on Computing and Freedom would provide oversight.

"It seems to me that we're now moving toward a balance between operational efficiency ... and the respect of freedoms," French Defense Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian told parliament.

But groups that represent Internet service providers and defend digital freedoms think the proposed law goes too far.

"Considering the recently uncovered evidence of massive and generalized spying on citizens, the maneuvers of the president and of the government deceive no one," said Philippe Aigrain, co-founder of La Quadrature du Net, a lobby that urges governments to protect personal data and Internet freedom. "This bill sets up a generalized surveillance regime and risks to destroy once and for all the limited trust between citizens and agencies responsible for security."

The French business lobby Medef said the [law](#) could be particularly harmful to the country's efforts to attract innovative businesses.

"This is a serious infringement of the confidence all actors must have in the Internet," Medef said in a statement.

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