

European Parliament Kills Call to Protect Edward Snowden

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Global Research, February 13, 2014

[World Socialist Web Site](#)

Region: [Europe](#)

Theme: [Law and Justice](#)

Under intense pressure from both the Obama administration and national governments in Europe, a committee of the European Parliament has killed a measure calling for asylum and protection for National Security Agency (NSA) whistleblower Edward Snowden should he leave his temporary haven in Russia for anywhere within the European Union.

Not only did the panel reject an amendment Wednesday that would have called on EU members to offer to protect Snowden from persecution at the hands of US authorities, it excised any mention of his name from a 60-page report that is based entirely on the secret documents that he made public. These documents have exposed a massive spying operation against hundreds of millions of people in Europe, the United States and internationally. The report is slated to be submitted to the full Parliament next month.

Also rejected was an amendment calling on US authorities to drop attempts to prosecute Snowden under the 1917 Espionage Act.

The vote came Wednesday afternoon on the European Parliament's civil liberties committee, which approved a draft report on mass surveillance prepared by Claude Moraes, the deputy leader of the British Labour Party in the European Parliament. The report was passed with 33 votes in favor, 7 against and 17 abstentions.

The proposed amendment in defense of Snowden called on EU member states "to drop criminal charges, if any, against Edward Snowden and to offer him protection from prosecution, extradition or rendition by third parties, in recognition of his status as whistleblower and international human rights defender."

A separate resolution, also defeated, called upon Washington "to give amnesty to Edward Snowden for initiating the process of rethinking the course of intelligence agencies."

The European Greens, who tabled the amendment calling for protection of Snowden, condemned the passage of the report without its inclusion, pointing out that without Snowden's actions there would have been no exposure of massive illegal surveillance, which was the basis of the document.

"Center-right and socialist MEPs [members of the European Parliament] have voted to leave whistleblower Edward Snowden in the lurch by rejecting an amendment calling for Snowden to be granted protection in the EU," Green spokesperson Jan Philipp Albrecht said after the vote. "Edward Snowden's brave revelations have provided the basis for this inquiry, and failing to recognize this vital contribution by calling for his protection is a display of cowardice, which is borne out of a desire not to offend the US."

The reaction of the European United Left group within the European Parliament, which includes organizations such as Die Linke (Left Party) of Germany, the French Left Front, and Syriza of Greece, along with various Stalinist parties, was far more muted.

“We welcome the adoption of this report because for the first time the Parliament is, in effect, admitting that this spying and surveillance actually took place, instead of just being suspected,” said the group’s president, Gabi Zimmer of Die Linke.

“However, on the down side,” she continued, “there was no real discussion about the abuse of antiterrorism laws based on false assumptions, nothing about offering asylum to Snowden, no demand to put an end to the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP), and no real revision of the overall security architecture today, with the blurring of lines between internal and external security, police and intelligence.”

The mentioning of Snowden as an afterthought along with various other perceived failings in a resolution they otherwise praised reflected the cynical politics of these forces, who waged no genuine campaign on the NSA whistleblower’s behalf. These groups, representing privileged layers within Europe’s middle classes, adapt themselves to the right-wing social democratic parties, such as the Social Democratic Party (SPD) of Germany, the Socialist Party of France and the British Labour Party, which provided the votes required by the conservative parties in the European Union to block any mention of Snowden.

After defeating the amendment on Snowden, the committee adopted a toothless alternative put forward by the SPD- and Labour Party-led “Socialists and Democrats” faction, which merely called for the EU to “thoroughly examine the possibility of granting whistle-blowers international protection from persecution.”

The report itself calls for the suspension of the SWIFT agreement between the EU and Washington, in which international bank transfer information is fed to the US for supposed counterterrorism purposes. The documents provided by Snowden made it clear that the NSA is carrying out wholesale spying on European banking and credit card transactions. The document also advocates suspension of the “Safe Harbor” pact, which allows US companies to self-certify that they are in compliance with EU privacy rules.

Moraes, the author of the report, made it clear that the objective of the dominant factions in the European Parliament was to make some empty gestures toward civil liberties in order to overcome the devastating exposures of illegal spying that is being conducted in Europe and internationally.

“What we’ve ended up with is a condemnation of systematic, blanket collection of personal data,” said Moraes. “We want to draw a line between data that is useful for security purposes and data that is not of use for these purposes.”

The vote on the report came amid arrangements for Snowden to testify before the European Parliament civil liberties committee early next month. Snowden, who is living in asylum in Russia, has agreed to answer questions with a video recording, but has rejected for security reasons either a face-to-face meeting or an interactive video conference. A number of unnamed US military and intelligence operatives were quoted last month advocating Snowden’s assassination.

The US government has strongly opposed the ex-NSA contractor’s appearance before the

committee, a position bluntly spelled out by a US congressional delegation that visited the European Parliament last December and threatened retaliation if Snowden was allowed to speak. Congressman Mike Rogers, the Republican chair of the House Intelligence Committee, declared in Brussels that it was “beneath the dignity” of the European Parliament to talk to a “felon,” and threatened that such a development could mean an end to talks on a US-EU free trade pact.

While the US pressure is considerable, the killing of the amendment advocating protection for Snowden is not merely a matter of external forces, but the outcome of decisions taken within the major European governments and political parties. Like their counterparts in Washington, these governments and parties defend the interests of a narrow financial and corporate oligarchy. They have no commitment to democratic rights and are complicit in the totalitarian spying operations of the NSA.

This point was made candidly late last year by US Senator Chris Murphy (Democrat from Connecticut), who chairs the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on European Affairs. In remarks delivered in Brussels aimed at forestalling both aid to Snowden and any European Parliament report critical of US spying operations, Murphy stressed that any differences should be ironed out on a “bilateral” basis, rather than through the EU. After all, he stressed, the wholesale interception of telephone, email and Internet communications data was being done “largely in coordination with your countries’ intelligence services.”

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