

Poland's totalitarian history means its people accept surveillance – and dismiss Edward Snowden's disclosures – more than they should

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Today a coalition of three Polish NGOs are submitting 100 detailed questions to the Polish authorities relating to the Prism affair. We are asking about the reaction of Polish diplomats to various disclosures made by Edward Snowden, measures taken to protect civil rights and the confidentiality of governmental communication, secret agreements between security agencies and the documentation of Snowden's asylum proceedings. Up to now, the authorities have avoided any serious discussion of the issue, in contrast to their German counterparts. We hope to change this.

Surveillance remains a major human rights concern, no matter how developed the democracy concerned. However, those countries that carry totalitarian baggage, such as Poland, find an open public debate on this issue particularly challenging. Urgent problems such as an ineffective judiciary, overcrowded prisons and the discrimination of marginalised minorities make privacy concerns not less relevant but certainly more abstract. Polish citizens will not take to the streets to protest against abuses by the secret services, mass surveillance or the proliferation of CCTV. Even those who remember what it meant to live under total surveillance are now ready to accept the argument that national security has to prevail over individual freedoms. Poor education, low social capital and a popular belief that politics no longer matters pave the way for a new surveillance society.

This is probably why the disclosures made by Snowden have not led to a significant public outcry in this country. Government, opposition leaders, parliamentary commissions – nobody posed serious questions regarding the impact of Prism on Polish citizens. Four months of media reporting revealing the scale of secret surveillance proved insufficient to trigger strong political reaction. Snowden's request for asylum in Poland was officially treated like a joke: the minister of foreign affairs, Radosław Sikorski, became notorious for his public comment that Poland gave the whistleblower a taste of "Slavic resistance". Regardless of the public criticism that followed, Sikorski's performance spoke for our country's otherwise silent political leaders: we do not really care about creeping mass surveillance; US-Polish friendship has to be preserved.

Four months after Snowden made his first disclosures, the Polish people still don't know whether or how Prism and other secret programs affected their lives. It is not only about our online communication being secure. We have to ask the question whether the legal safeguards that we have on paper are still binding online. And we

expect the Polish government to answer. We cannot accept political silence when fundamental rights are at stake: not only the civic rights of European or Polish citizens, but the human rights of everyone who communicates via the internet. Shortsighted policy choices, such as trade negotiations with the US, simply cannot be more important.

Asking for information, verifying it and disclosing it to the general public is just one way of breaking the silence – one that can be used by independent, non-government organisations. It is the reason NGOs use their constitutional right to ask detailed questions. But we are not naive. We are aware that most of these questions will be left unanswered due to national security concerns. But even that matters: knowing what is secret makes it possible to challenge the secrecy before the courts. Every piece of information widens the narrow slot through which we can look inside the mechanism of power. Just by connecting different dots and identifying missing bits we make the authorities more accountable.

As citizens of a post-communist country we regard it as our duty to stand up against indiscriminate, pre-emptive surveillance. Lessons from the 20th century should not be forgotten now, when new technologies enable far more powerful control over our lives than what some experienced in the era that gave rise to Solidarity. Yet this battle is not just about technology and the security of online communication. The Prism affair questions the very essence of the contract between societies and their governments: accountability. This is what has to be fixed if we want to move forward. One way to start is by asking serious questions.

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