

*Valentina Pop*

BERLIN - Being spied upon by the US intelligence services can have its advantages: When the emails of top EU officials were hacked, it was the Americans who revealed the infiltration.

Back in 2011, two groups known as Comment and Byzantine Candor - believed to have been steered by the Chinese government - tapped into the emails of EU Council chief Herman Van Rompuy, EU counter-terrorism supremo Gilles de Kerchove and several other officials dealing with trade and development.

EUobserver has learned that it was the US intelligence service who tipped off the officials on the hack.

Fugitive US whistleblower Edward Snowden, a former CIA contractor who leaked data about a massive internet surveillance programme called Prism, has also revealed that EU offices in Brussels, Washington and New York were bugged by the US spying agencies, including their computer systems.

The US embassy in Brussels would not comment on the matter.

But Robert Baer, a former CIA officer turned security analyst, told this website that US bugging of EU offices is unlikely to be detected, even if so-called sweeps are carried out.

"If bugs were detected during a sweep, they would not indicate US fabrication. The CIA labels its bugs as Chinese or Russian. The only US-labelled bugs are made by the [Israeli intelligence] Mossad," he said.

He urged Europeans to ask for precise details about the terrorist attacks supposedly thwarted thanks to Prism.

The German interior minister, Hans-Peter Friedrich, has said his US counterparts told him some 45 terrorist attacks were thwarted worldwide, five of them in Germany, based on Prism data.

He then backtracked on the specifics of the five cases, saying it could also be that one group was planning multiple attacks.

Baer considers these claims "exaggerated."

"I've never seen evidence of a case initiated just based on algorithms ran through Skype or emails. It is always that they have a suspect and then they run that name through all the databases they have," he said.

He spoke of a "huge industry" of software, Cloud servers, and algorithms ballooning in the US to service this massive surveillance scheme under the pretext of fighting terrorism.

"It scares me because someone is going to misuse it. The temptation will be simply too big not to use it against political rivals, for instance. I already heard accusations that they have used Prism against Airbus," he said, in reference to the long-standing trade dispute between the US aircraft company Boeing and its French rival Airbus.

Meanwhile, Estonian President Toomas Ilves, a US-educated politician, told Postimees newspaper that indignation over the spying of EU offices is hypocritical.

"I believe that in the field of economic espionage, for instance, many states spy about their friends. They do not consider it hostile activity, rather competition.

"Would we all be lily white virgins, over here, the just indignation might be somewhat understandable. But it is very difficult to understand it, knowing how some large European states have acted in like manner," he said.

Ilves said the only way Europeans can avoid being snooped by the US is to start building their own servers known as "cloud computing."

"It is possible for us to start building our European cloud, under European law. In many European countries, data protection is stronger than in the States. Meaning that as we use the European cloud, NSA would not get the data.

"Actually, it is not the problem of Big Brother, rather that of Little Sister. If you have a little sister then she will know all you do and she will be happy to let others know," Ilves said.

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