

Human rights and surveillance: can the EU ensure the democratic usage of its technologies?

“There is a proliferation of surveillance technologies around the world. It is easy and likely that these technologies, which could be of harm to both human rights and our strategic interests, could fall into the wrong hands”, says Marietje Schaake. The Dutch member of ALDE is drafting a report on the impact of digital surveillance on human rights in third countries, a topic discussed 21 January at a hearing organised by the committee on international trade and the subcommittee on human rights.

Technologies have helped in advancing human rights and empowering citizens, and through providing better access to knowledge have also had a positive impact on education and the media. Speaking at a public hearing chaired by Elena Valenciano and Bernd Lange, the chairs of the human rights subcommittee and the international trade committee, Marietje Schaake said that the EU must acknowledge the risks for human rights in the absence of smart policies.

“We have many valuable lessons from the events in recent years, such as the Arab uprising or the NSA revelations which have shown surveillance technologies have harmed the interests of people, their safety and their human rights”, warned Schaake who underlined the need to update export controls with new technologies.

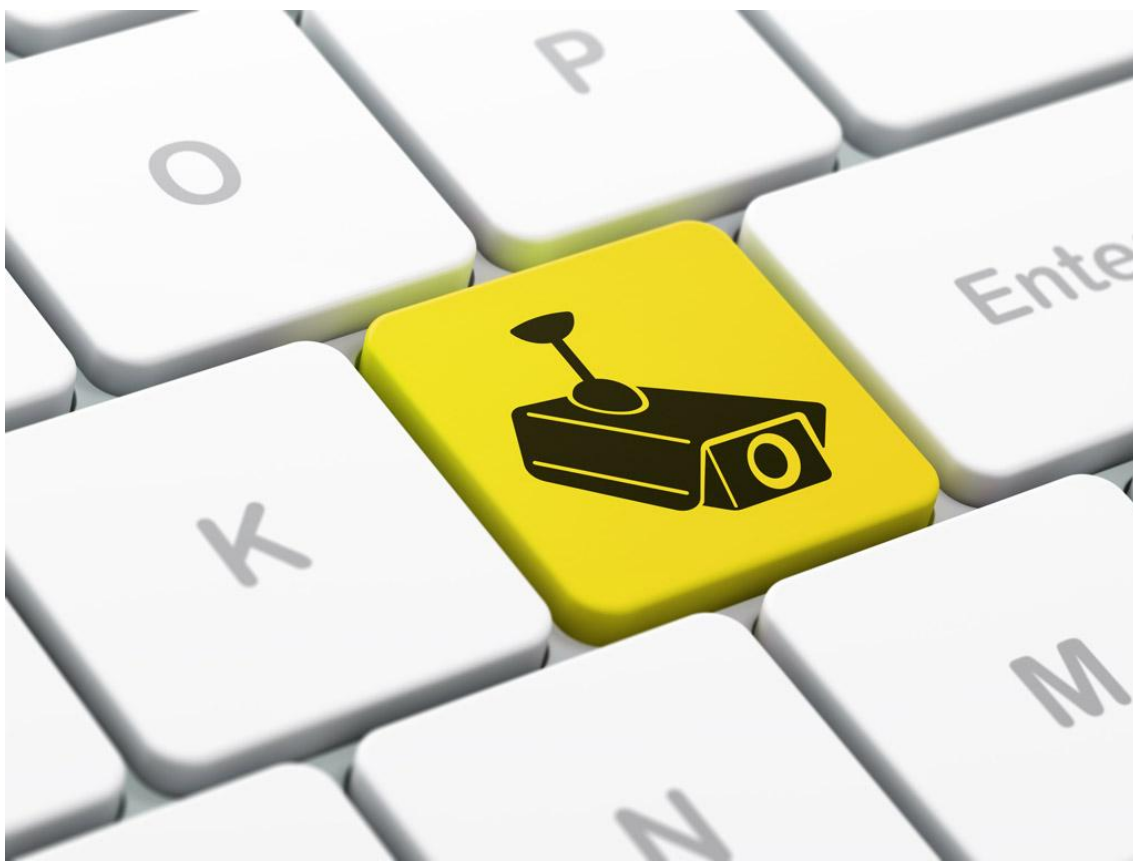
The first part of the public hearing focused on the problem of controlling the export of European technologies to third countries where they can be used in the surveillance of protest movements, individuals and opposition parties. On the other hand, experts warned that expanding export control can have a negative impact on jobs and industry, and can in some ways be a futile exercise because of the availability of the technology. The second panel was focused on the impact of technologies on human rights in third countries.

In the aftermath of the Charlie Hebdo attack there have been calls for more security. Former UN special rapporteur Frank La Rue remarked that states have an obligation to protect citizens and strengthen security. He explained that surveillance can be used according to rules but the problem is that there is a loss of capacity in monitoring the procedures. However “mass surveillance is inherently an abuse of privacy”, he said.

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