

Nationalism cannot be the answer to unfettered spy agencies

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What really annoys me about the current debate on the BND, Germany's foreign spy agency? It's the nationalist undertones. Obviously I'm against spying and all illegal practices. But I also condemn lots of things that are allowed under law. It's not that important to me whether my political allies and I are being spied on by German, French or US secret services. When, in the wake of recent developments and in particular since Edward Snowden's revelations, I call for investigations and work to ensure that those responsible are punished for their crimes, I'm not acting in some *national* interest. I'm interested in the structures behind the spying, and these are often very similar, regardless of where you look. At the moment the main difference between the various intelligence agencies is their technological capacities. Mainland European states would happily adopt many of the practices of the NSA and the GCHQ if they had the technical know-how. And there's little evidence to suggest that much has changed since the Snowden leaks in terms of the attitude of the intelligence agencies or the political will to rein them in.

In light of this, the German and the French outrage at the US seems hypocritical to me. I'd feel better if there was no widespread preventative spying anywhere in the world, if there were no domestic or foreign spy agencies at all. The series of murders by the radical right-wing group NSU has raised a few key questions here: Why do we need the German "department for the protection of the constitution", the domestic intelligence agency? The police should take care of whatever needs to be done – but let this be done transparently and within the limits of the law.

Instead we see far too much of a friend/foe attitude, even from well-meaning voices within the opposition. The USA, the NSA, the "bad guys" – to me these political models are too neat. This is particularly the case when they are accompanied by lamentations on the lack of respect for German sovereignty. Here the crossover to nationalistic thought patterns is all too fluid and the problem of wholesale spy agency control that threatens individual freedom around the world can quickly descend into an "us versus them" discourse. The mobilization of these kinds of resentments is dangerous as well as naïve.

This becomes clear from a quick look at the newspapers at the moment: racism, exclusion and nationalism at every turn. Back in the early 80's, investigations by intelligence services and police into the radical right-wing Oktoberfest attacks in 1980 (13 dead, 200 injured) were mired in failure. Authorities ignored comprehensive testimony and clues on a wider network of people colluding with perpetrator Gundolf Köhler. Now there are plans to straighten out this spectacular failure, 35 years later. There are similarities with the more recent National Socialist Underground (NSU) murders of migrants and a policewoman and attempted murder of a second officer – once again the police and intelligence authorities were and are groping around in the dark. For years the possibility of a racist motive was categorically excluded while the victims were accused of being involved in organized crime. In light of what we know about the widespread activities of the domestic intelligence agency in connection with the NSU and the dramatic failures during the investigation I think it's no exaggeration to speak here of an institutionalized racism that served to thwart effective investigations and prevent the NSU from being uncovered sooner. And it's not much better in other countries. The Front National could soon be in government in France, despite founder and – now former – honorary chairman Le Pen dismissing the Nazi gas chambers as a mere historical "detail". Concerned Swiss citizens are worried about a "tsunami of asylum seekers" on account of plans to offer their villages as places of refuge to people who have fled to Switzerland. In post-apartheid South Africa, of all places, where they seemed to have secured formal equality for all, seven immigrants were killed during recent racist

riots while the President stood by and poured fuel on the xenophobic fire. And reports of racist police violence continue to stream in from around the world: an attack in Israel against an Israeli soldier of Ethiopian extraction, in the USA in Baltimore, Ferguson and elsewhere.

Is that what our world is to look like in the future? Do we want to live in societies that differentiate between us and them, between privileged members of the majority and everybody else? In societies where the might of the state is deployed for meticulous preventative surveillance aimed at combating Islamic terror but where the authorities are not willing or able to even properly investigate neo-Nazi murders, never mind prevent them. If this isn't what we want we need to take action against racism and exclusion and to work to secure fair and decent conditions beyond our own backyards. But to effectively fight nationalist resentment, we also need to take a different approach to present day realities and learn to properly understand them. We would be doing a great disservice to the work of Edward Snowden if we were to allow the discussion on mass surveillance to turn into a debate on defending German sovereignty from US intrusion.