Olofsson claims Sweden has tapped phones 'for decades'

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Deputy prime minister Maud Olofsson has added a new twist to Sweden's divisive surveillance debate. The Centre Party leader claims that defence minister Mikael Odenberg's proposed legislation would merely codify practices that have already been in operation for decades.

Previously, at a time when all telecommunications were state-operated, Sweden's National Defence Radio Establishment (Försvarets Radioanstalt - FRA) regularly tapped telephone lines in and out of the country, says Olofsson.

It was only when Telia became a registered company that the need for legislation arose, she says.

"Sweden has always listened in as a means of ensuring that we have had the information necessary to protect national security. I don't think that is a secret," said Olofsson at a press conference on Friday.

"Now we will get legislation, which will also mean that we protect personal integrity," said Olofsson, whose Centre Party supports the controversial bill.

Mikael Odenberg could not say with any certainty whether Olofsson was correct in her assumptions about FRA in the pre-Telia era.

"All I know is that we do not currently have any surveillance on the cable network. For six decades we had a surveillance system with no regulation and absolutely no protection for private individuals. I think that is forgotten sometimes in this discussion," said Odenberg.

According to security expert Wilhelm Agrell, there is no general consensus as to whether FRA has been tapping phones for decades. He does however feel that Maud Olofsson has put her finger on an important argument that supports the need for new legislation, namely the deregulation of a former monopoly. This makes legislation necessary as a means of keeping private companies in step.

"In April 1948 the government reached a secret agreement to make telegraph traffic available to FRA on a limited basis. This concerned telegraphs to and from foreign missions in Sweden. That agreement has been made public, so it is somewhat difficult to deny it," said Agrell.

"We don't know if this permission was successively extended. But it is not in any way unthinkable that they actually had access to more traffic than they have cared to admit," he added.

Per Kjellnäs, former head of FRA, says that his organization did in fact listen in on telecommunications, but never over the cable network.

"It must be some kind of misunderstanding. We were able to listen in on satellite communications. I don't want to reveal the extent to which FRA did so, but the legal possibility was available to us.

"In the 1970s, 80s and 90s, a lot more telecommunications took place in the ether. Previously FRA was not allowed to listen to anything over a wire, we only had access to the ether," said Kjellnäs.
"I have a suspicion that this unpopular law that the government is trying to launch has come about as a result of a wish to legalize an activity which is some respects already exists in reality," said Agrell.

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