

Anger as German 'digital rights' blog probed for treason

BERLIN, GERMANY: German journalists and lawmakers warned of an attack on press freedom on Friday following news of a treason probe against bloggers who published Internet surveillance plans by the domestic security service.



The investigation against two writers of the blog *Netzpolitik.org* for allegedly publishing state secrets is thought to be Germany's first treason case levelled against media since the 1960s.

It comes amid continued debate over sweeping online surveillance by the US National Security Agency (NSA) revealed by fugitive intelligence contractor Edward Snowden and the degree of German cooperation.

The German Journalists Association condemned the probe for treason, which carries between one year and life in jail, as an "impermissible attempt to silence two critical colleagues" and called on chief prosecutor Harald Range to drop the case.

Writers of *Netzpolitik* (Net politics), which focuses on "digital civil rights" and was in 2014 awarded Germany's Grimme Online Award, were defiant, stating that "we will not be intimidated".

The blog had in February and April published documents on plans to step up Internet surveillance by Germany's Federal Service for the Protection of the Constitution, whose chief Hans-Georg Maassen filed a criminal complaint.

Netzpolitik founder Markus Beckedahl, one of the two writers named in the probe, charged it was increasingly clear that the German government is "knee-deep in the swamp of NSA and Co", in comments to public broadcaster ARD.

The chair of the parliamentary judicial committee, Renate Kuenast of the Greens party, said the case "infuriates me and is a constitutional disgrace", adding that "if there were no investigative journalism, we would know nothing."

"What annoys me is the disparity," Kuenast told the newspaper *Koelner Stadt-Anzeiger*, referring to judicial inaction over the wider NSA scandal.

The senior political editor of the Munich-based *Sueddeutsche Zeitung*, Hans Leyendecker, called the probe an "attempt to intimidate journalists and intimidate informants".

Many commentators drew parallels to a treason case against news weekly *Der Spiegel* after it published a report in 1962 that pointed to shortcomings in the German armed forces.

The Hamburg-based weekly was raided by police and its editors arrested, sparking street protests in support of *Der Spiegel*. A court later ruled in its favour and the defence minister stepped down, in what was seen as a victory for democracy and cemented its reputation for investigative journalism.

Source: AFP

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