

Tracking apps in Europe face privacy concerns and legal challenges



Paris, April 14 (RHC)-- The EU is reportedly prepared to adopt a common strategy for COVID-19 tracking apps amid calls to create a pan-European software model. Such projects have been met with privacy concerns and legal hurdles in Germany and France.

Brussels is set to take a “common approach to the use of digital technologies and data” in response to the coronavirus pandemic, according to a document cited by Reuters. Several EU countries have already been developing their own mobile apps designed to track the spread of the disease.

A common strategy would allow the European Commission to monitor such apps and check whether they comply with security, privacy and data protection rules. All personal data collected by the apps will be erased once the pandemic is under control, the Commission pledged.

The news comes after European Data Protection Supervisor Wojciech Wiewiorowski called for the creation of a “pan-European model ‘COVID-19 mobile application.’”

However, the idea of deploying apps, similar to those used in China and South Korea, to help users manage quarantine and avoid outbreak areas, has raised concerns among European privacy activists. News of the German government working on a nationwide Covid-19 tracking app was met with some skepticism online as users expressed fears on social media that the measure may lead to mass surveillance.

In a similar vein, the European Digital Rights umbrella group, which unites human rights organizations in several EU states, stressed last month that all steps to use personal data and geolocation to combat Covid-19 must be strictly temporary, “have proper safeguards, and cannot excessively undermine the fundamental right to a private life.”

The path to a widely-used tracking app has seen another challenge in France, where the government is exploring the possibility of creating a ‘StopCovid’ smartphone app to identify the chains of infection. French laws forbid individual smartphone tracking. Prime Minister Edouard Philippe explained last week that the government using geolocation is “not legally feasible.”

Meanwhile, Secretary of State for Digital Economy Cedric O, who heads the ‘StopCovid’ project, told Le Monde newspaper that if the app becomes available, citizens will be free to choose whether to download and install it.

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