

Calls to pardon Ed Snowden after European court rules UK spy agency GCHQ's online snooping was illegal

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Edward Snowden speaks via video link during a news conference in New York City, September 14, 2016 (Photo: Reuters / Brendan McDermid)

London, May 26 (RHC)-- After winning a landmark ruling against the UK's GCHQ spy agency, activist groups praised former NSA contractor Edward Snowden for blowing the lid off the UK's surveillance regime. And activists called yet again for his pardoning.

In a ruling issued on Tuesday morning, the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) declared that GCHQ's bulk interception of online communications, which was first brought to light by former US National Security Agency contractor Edward Snowden in 2013, was illegal. GCHQ stands for Government Communications Headquarters.

In its findings, the ECHR found three "fundamental deficiencies" in the GCHQ's interception process: it had been authorized by a politician and not an independent body, search terms that would be flagged by the spy agency had not been included in the application for a warrant, and search terms linked to individuals – for example names, email addresses, and phone numbers – had not been authorised internally prior to their use.

Former Guardian editor Alan Rusbridger, who published Snowden's revelations in 2013 and destroyed hard drives belonging to the whistleblower rather than handing them over to the government, celebrated the ruling. "It's taken a long time," he tweeted, "but turns out @Snowden was right."

Snowden himself downplayed his own significance. "Without journalists to tell the story, the public would not have known about it. Without human right lawyers defending that public, the courts would not have cared about it. Without those courts, politicians would still be denying it," he tweeted, adding "I could not have done this alone."

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However, Snowden remains in exile in Moscow, and is still wanted by U.S. authorities on espionage charges. With his passport canceled by Washington, Russia remains a safe haven for Snowden, and earlier this year he applied for Russian citizenship. Following the ECHR's verdict, Big Brother Watch Director Silkie Carlo called on European leaders to protect Snowden, saying that he "clearly deserves the protection of democratic nations across Europe for his selfless defence of human rights."

Yet even if Snowden were to have a passport, leaving Russia would be fraught with danger. Back in 2013, Bolivian President Evo Morales found his plane forced to land in Austria after officials in France, Italy and Spain closed their airspace due to a tip-off that Snowden was on board. Snowden was in fact in Moscow, and the U.S. is believed to have been behind the tip-off and grounding.

Snowden's supporters have long called for his pardoning, and in the final days of the Trump administration, rumors circulated that the Republican president would grant him, and WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, a pardon – if for no other reason than a shared animosity toward the US' intelligence agencies and 'deep state'. However, a pardon never materialized, and the Biden administration has given zero indication that it will entertain the idea.

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