



Written by [David Kelly](#) on March 27, 2023

Despite Opposition, France Could Use AI Surveillance at Paris Olympics

France's National Assembly is set to approve a controversial AI [video-surveillance law](#) on Tuesday that will allow monitoring of public spaces for suspicious behavior during the 2024 Paris Olympics, though banning the use of facial-recognition technology, starting this spring and continuing until June 2025.

Last Thursday, the assembly adopted Article 7 of the pending bill, which is quite controversial, as it states that AI video surveillance may be used on a trial basis to ensure the safety of the Olympic Games. Numerous groups in opposition say the use of this technology will set a dangerous precedent.



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The Register [reported](#):

Surveillance footage collected would be processed using an algorithm “whose sole purpose is to detect, in real time, predetermined events likely to present or reveal” security risks – such as terrorist acts or other “serious threats to the safety of persons,” according to the proposal.

This data would then be automatically sent to the police and/or security services so emergency responders can take action, if needed.

Proponents of the law claim the technology used will be able to anticipate crowd movements and spot abandoned luggage or potentially dangerous incidents. French lawmakers rejected the use of facial-recognition technology or any kind of biometrics that could be used for data analytics, however.

“This processing does not use any biometric identification system, does not process any biometric data and does not implement any facial recognition technique,” the bill says. “They cannot carry out any reconciliation, interconnection or automated linking with other processing of personal data,” shared The Register.

Before last week's approval of the bill in the French Senate, 38 “civil society” groups opposing the AI surveillance plan sent an open [letter](#) to the government disputing Article 7 of the proposed law. The groups stated that “under this law, France would become the first EU member state to explicitly legalize” the use of invasive algorithm-driven video surveillance and that the “proposed surveillance measures violate international human rights law.”

The opposition groups challenged the law, saying it is a serious threat to civic freedoms and democratic principles and threatens the “very essence of the right to privacy and data protection, which is incompatible with international and European human rights law.”



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The groups' letter stated:

The mere existence of untargeted (often called indiscriminate) algorithmic video surveillance in publicly accessible areas can have a chilling effect on fundamental civic freedoms, especially the right to freedom of assembly, association and expression. As noted by the European Data Protection Board and the European Data Protection Supervisor, biometric surveillance stifles people's reasonable expectation of anonymity in public spaces and reduces their will and ability to exercise their civic freedoms, for fear of being identified, profiled or even wrongly prosecuted.

The letter's signatories also shared that the "legislation significantly and dangerously expands the reasons justifying the surveillance of public spaces," and added that "using algorithmic systems to fight crime has resulted in over-policing [and] structural discrimination in the criminal justice system."

According to [France 24](#), Katia Roux, a technology and human-rights specialist for Amnesty International, said in a statement after Article 7 was approved:

This technology is not legal today. In France, experiments have been done but not within the legal framework that this law proposes to create. Nor is it legal at the European level. It is even brought up during discussions in the European Parliament about technology and the regulation of artificial intelligence systems. The legislation could therefore also violate the European regulation currently being drafted.

By adopting this law, France would become the champion of video surveillance in the EU and set an extremely dangerous precedent. It would send an extremely worrying signal to countries that might be tempted to use this technology against their own population.

French lawmakers intend for this legislation to be temporary and experimental. However, some human-rights organizations fear that the government is using the Olympics as an excuse to set up a permanent surveillance system.

The Register [shared](#):

"Once all these algorithms have been tested for two years ... [and] tens of thousands of agents will have been trained in the use of these algorithms, it seems unlikely that the VSA will be abandoned at the end of 2024," argued NGO La Quadrature du Net about the Olympic algorithmic video surveillance (VSA).

In addition to fear of this law setting precedent and becoming permanent, the civil-rights groups [shared their concern](#) that Article 7 is "indicative of a worrying trend of governments expanding their surveillance powers as an emergency measure in the name of security. Yet rarely are these 'exceptional' measures promptly revoked. Instead, surveillance and control become normalized, often lacking appropriate safeguards, transparency, stakeholder engagement and accountability mechanisms."

The legislation faces one more formal vote in front of the French National Assembly on Tuesday, but the opposition is pushing hard against its enactment. It is possible the law could receive numerous changes, good and/or bad, that will need approval of both the Assembly and Senate before a final version is agreed upon.



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