

France's virus tracing app ready to go, parliament to vote

May 27 2020, by Sylvie Corbet



In this photo taken on April 20, 2020, a woman wearing protective face mask looks at her phone past a closed restaurant during a nationwide confinement to counter the COVID-19, in Paris. French lawmakers are set to vote on whether allowing or not France's contact-tracing app designed to contain the spread of the coronavirus that is raising privacy concerns. (AP Photo/Francois Mori, File)

French lawmakers were set to vote Wednesday on whether to endorse a contact-tracing app designed to contain the spread of the coronavirus amid sharp debate over privacy concerns.

If approved, France's StopCovid app will be made available to users on a voluntary basis starting Monday. The government committed to honoring the result of the non-binding parliamentary vote.

French privacy watchdog CNIL backed the app this week, stating the technology "won't lead to creating a list of infected people but only a list of contacts using pseudonymous data. It does respect the concept of data protection."

Governments around the world are scrambling to develop smartphone tracing apps as part of measures aimed at keeping a lid on fresh Covid-19 outbreaks as they ease lockdown restrictions. About two dozen countries, including many European ones, are building apps based on a new mobile software interface jointly developed by U.S. tech giants Google and Apple. France decided to use its own system.

Health authorities have cautioned that tracing apps alone aren't an effective method to limit infections and should be used to support conventional but time-consuming manual contact tracing, which involves workers interviewing people who test positive for the virus.



French President Emmanuel Macron, center, wearing a protective face mask, as he visits a Valeo manufacturer plant, in Etaples, , northern France, Tuesday May 26, 2020. France's government is injecting more than 8 billion euros (\$8.8 billion) to save the country's car industry from huge losses wrought by virus lockdowns, and wants to use the crisis to make France the No. 1 producer of electric vehicles in Europe. (Ludovic Marin, Pool via AP)

The French app uses low-energy Bluetooth signals on mobile phones to trace individuals that people infected with the virus come into close contact with and informs users of potential exposure so they can self-isolate. It will store anonymous data in a government-run centralized database for 14 days before erasing it.

The government says the app doesn't involve location tracking and it

guaranteed the privacy of users.

"No one knows where the person went," Justice Minister Nicole Belloubet said. "We only know that some people came close to each other at some point."

But civil liberties groups have raised concerns over the issue, over fears it could lead to increased surveillance.

A public agency that monitors the respecting of [human rights](#) in France, the National Consultative Commission for Human Rights, said in a statement Tuesday that the app "affects in a disproportionate manner the rights and freedoms of all citizens."



French President Emmanuel Macron delivers a speech flanked by French Economy and Finance Minister Bruno Le Maire, right, and French Minister for the Ecological and Inclusive Transition Elisabeth Borne, left, after a visit at the Valeo manufacturer plant, in Etaples, northern France, Tuesday May 26, 2020. France's government is injecting more than 8 billion euros (\$8.8 billion) to save the country's car industry from huge losses wrought by virus lockdowns, and wants to use the crisis to make France the No. 1 producer of electric vehicles in Europe. (Ludovic Marin, Pool via AP)

An advocacy group for internet users' rights, La Quadrature du Net, said that "deploying an app whose objectives, technology and usage carry significant risks for our society and our freedoms, for likely mediocre results (possibly even counter-productive ones), is not something we can consider acceptable."

French President Emmanuel Macron's centrist party has a majority in the National Assembly, where opposition lawmakers from the left and the right said they would vote against the app.

Far-left leader Jean-Luc Melenchon denounced "ways to allow permanent control of the population and permanent losses for individual freedoms."

The head of the conservative group in the French National Assembly, Damien Abad, questioned the efficiency of the app, saying it is being introduced too late. However, he said the decision for lawmakers involves "primarily an ethical discussion rather than a technical and legal one."

"I don't want a society where individual freedoms and privacy are pushed aside," he said.



Sunbathers lie in an area marked by cordons of ropes and wooden stakes to enforce social distancing measures in La Grande Motte, southern France, Sunday, May 24, 2020. Grateful French families flocked to the beach at La Grande Motte on the Mediterranean shore Sunday, swimming and sunbathing in areas carefully marked to keep them a safe distance from others. (AP Photo/Daniel Cole)

After the National Assembly votes, the debate will then move to at the Senate.

Initially meant to accompany the lifting of restrictions starting on May 11, the app's release was delayed due to [technical issues](#).

The junior minister in charge of the digital economy, Cedric O, said the app was tested on 100 smartphones representing 17 brands and will be available to work with Google Android devices and Apple iPhones.

"It's working well and doesn't drain the battery," he said.

European countries have chosen different approaches to developing their own tracing apps as part of their strategies to prevent a second wave of virus cases after national lockdowns end.

Germany, Italy, Austria, Estonia, Switzerland, and Ireland are embracing a "decentralized" approach, widely preferred by researchers and privacy experts because anonymous identifier codes for contacts are kept on devices only.



Parisians ride their bikes along the Seine river in Paris, Sunday, May 24, 2020 as France gradually lifts its COVID-19 lockdown. In the French capital this weekend, Parisians soaked up the sun along the embankments of the Seine River and lounged on ledges outside the Tuileries Gardens, still shuttered like all of the city's parks as the city gradually emerges from confinement. (AP Photo/Francois Mori)

France and the U.K. decided instead to send data to a central server, in which the user's identifier code as well as those of other people are uploaded. Officials say this would help them react more quickly to virus flare-ups and aid decision-making.

The French government refused to use the Google-Apple tracing app technology released last week, saying it lacked sufficient data privacy guarantees.

"The government believes that health protection of the French is an exclusive mission for the state and not for private international actors," it said in a statement.

France, one of the world's hardest-hit countries, has reported at least 28,530 coronavirus-related deaths.

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