

Cambridge Analytica revelations are only 'tip of the iceberg', warns EU data protection chief

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News

The EU's data protection watchdog has voiced "real concern" at revelations that Facebook and data analytics firm Cambridge Analytica may have misused confidential information.



Giovanni Buttarelli | Photo credit: European Parliament audiovisual

Speaking on Tuesday, Giovanni Buttarelli, the European data protection supervisor (EDPS), also said he believes the revelations are only the "tip of the iceberg."

Facebook and Cambridge Analytica, based in the UK, are at the centre of a dispute over the harvesting and use of personal data - and whether it was used to influence the outcome of the US 2016 presidential election or the UK Brexit referendum.

On Tuesday, the UK information commissioner said she was seeking an urgent court warrant to enter the London headquarters of the elections consultancy Cambridge Analytica after the firm was caught in an undercover sting and accused of using honey traps and running fake news campaigns.

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Both firms deny any wrongdoing.

European Parliament President Antoni Tajani also entered the fray, saying on Tuesday that the institution would investigate to see if the data was misused.

A spokesperson for UK Prime Minister Theresa May said she was “very concerned” about the revelations.

Buttarelli, speaking in Brussels to launch the EDPS annual report, told this website the disclosures gave “real cause for concern” and that he thinks it represents only the “tip of the iceberg” of a much wider problem concerning data privacy.

He said that it was for this reason that EU legislation on ePrivacy was “essential.”

He said, “This is likely to be the big scandal of the year and I am appealing to national regulators and others such as consumer organisations to work together to ensure we get to the bottom of this.”

The official, who earlier in the day had presented his report to MEPs on the civil liberties committee, added, “Harvesting data in the way that has been alleged to have happened here is a very serious matter.

“The message I got in presenting the report in Parliament was that MEPs want to better understand the issue and this particular case involving Cambridge Analytica and Facebook.

“From what I can see it is clear that something has taken place that is in breach of EU regulations.”

His annual report says that 2018 will be a “landmark year for data protection.”

He also said the EU was a world leader on data protection and privacy.

“Yet while technology continues to develop at a rapid pace, the new EU data protection framework remains incomplete. Revised data protection rules for the EU institutions and bodies and new rules on ePrivacy are still urgently needed.”

Aside from the Cambridge Analytica scandal, he said that the “ever-increasing pervasiveness of big data analytics and artificial intelligence in our daily lives has a varied impact on civic engagement in decision-making and on the barriers to public involvement in democratic processes.”

According to the Buttarelli, the ease of gathering and storing large volumes of data “generates massive amounts of digital advertising revenue, the vast majority of which, and the resulting power, is vested in a small number of companies which dominate the digital field.”

Over the last two years, he said that initial optimism surrounding the potential for civic engagement stemming from a digitally connected world, has subsided to a “concern that people’s minds are being manipulated.”

“With devices designed to draw in the user and to maximise their attention, the possibilities for exploitation are vast.

“The feeding of large quantities of misleading, false or scurrilous information to people frequently with the aim of influencing political discourse and elections has been coined ‘fake news’ or ‘online disinformation’.”

About the author

Martin Banks is a senior reporter for the Parliament Magazine

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