

Brussels is considering expanding license plate surveillance – the USA shows where this can lead

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Automatic cameras capture license plates and vehicle movements; Germany already uses such systems for investigations, and Austria has permitted automated access controls since this year. The EU Commission now wants to examine the possibility of using automatic license plate recognition more extensively in road traffic and linking it more closely to the Schengen Information System. In the United States, we can already see what can happen to local cameras when databases and authorities become increasingly interconnected: there, dozens of municipalities are now pulling the plug on a massive license plate surveillance network.

You drive to work in the morning. Somewhere above or beside the road, there's a camera. You don't have to stop, show any ID, and in all likelihood, you won't even notice the check. The license plate is read automatically, the location and time can be recorded, and the data can be compared with other information. A single camera initially only provides one match. If enough of these devices are placed in different locations and the data is linked, it's possible to determine where a vehicle was traveling at different times.

The technology for this is already in use in Europe. Under certain conditions, the German Federal Police are permitted to automatically record license plates in public traffic areas without the knowledge of the individuals concerned. The [Federal Police Act](#) currently stipulates a temporary and non-nationwide implementation. The license plates can be automatically compared with wanted notices; if there is no match, the data must be deleted immediately and without leaving a trace.

also [The Code of Criminal Procedure](#) provides for automatic license plate recognition. In investigations of serious crimes, license plate numbers, as well as location, date, time, and direction of travel, may be collected within a limited geographical area. The data is then compared with vehicles that can be linked to the suspect or, under certain conditions, to individuals associated with them. Here, too, the law stipulates that if no match is found, the data must be deleted immediately.

Austria opens the door to automatic access controls

Austria also created a new legal framework in spring 2026. Municipalities can now use automated license plate cameras to monitor access restrictions, for example in pedestrian zones, school streets, or other traffic-calmed areas. The corresponding amendment to the Road Traffic Regulations passed the Federal Council in April. A vehicle's data is to be deleted immediately if no violation occurs. Transport Minister Peter Hanke also stated that the Security Police Act may not be applied to these checks.

The political explosiveness was evident even during the [parliamentary debate](#). The FPÖ (Freedom Party of Austria) spoke of a looming infringement on freedom of movement and surveillance of public spaces. Representatives of the governing parties countered that data processing was strictly limited and that inconspicuous vehicles would be immediately deleted from the system. According to the debate, more than 20 Austrian cities had expressed support for the possibility of such automated access controls. This means that legal and technical frameworks for automatic license plate recognition already exist in Germany and Austria. Brussels now wants to go further.

In its European security strategy "ProtectEU" of April 1, 2025, the European Commission [explicitly](#) addresses movement data in transport. Data from other modes of transport are currently only available in fragmented form for law enforcement purposes. Therefore, the Commission is examining the expanded use of automatic number plate recognition (ANPR) for road traffic. At the same time, the Commission intends to investigate how this technology can be more closely integrated with the Schengen Information System (SIS). The goal is clear: more automatic data collection and greater connectivity. And it is precisely this connectivity that determines whether a license plate camera reports a match only at a single location or becomes part of a much larger surveillance system.

A nationwide camera network was created in the USA.

The American company Flock Safety demonstrates the potential of this technology. Its automatic license plate cameras are now deployed in 49 US states. Thousands of police departments use the system, enabling them to search data across jurisdictional boundaries and share it with other agencies. In addition to license plates, the cameras also capture other vehicle characteristics. This transforms the local camera into a component of a nationwide network. A local police department no longer needs to have its own cameras recording a

wanted vehicle. It can check the system to see if a connected camera elsewhere has captured the car.

In early 2026, the city of Mountain View, California, discovered that federal authorities had accessed data from its Flock system. Local police stated that a feature allowing for nationwide searches had been activated without their knowledge. The incident triggered a comprehensive review of access rights.

Resistance to Flock has grown considerably. Since the beginning of the year, according to a survey cited by the [Associated Press](#), more than 50 authorities or municipalities have terminated, suspended, or rejected contracts, or deactivated their cameras. Flock responded on August 13 with a system overhaul. The standard data retention period is to be reduced from 30 to seven days, police queries are to be linked to case numbers, and suspicious searches are to be automatically detected.

Citizens fight for access to data – then Washington changes the law

[The legal battle in Washington state is particularly revealing](#). Jose Rodriguez wanted to know what publicly funded license plate cameras actually recorded and demanded the stored data from various cities. Sedro-Woolley and Stanwood refused to release the recordings. The case went to court. In November 2025, a judge ruled that the images generated by Flock cameras on behalf of the cities constituted public records and were therefore subject to Washington's Public Records Act. The fact that the material was stored on the servers of a private company did not exempt it from public scrutiny. Rodriguez had won.

A few months later, Washington changed the legal landscape. On March 30, 2026, Governor Bob Ferguson signed the Driver Privacy Act, [Senate Bill 6002](#), into law. The law took effect the same day. Washington defines what constitutes license plate data remarkably broadly. This includes GPS coordinates, location, date and time, speed, photograph, license plate number, vehicle characteristics, and other identifying information. State and local authorities remain the legal owners of the data collected by these systems.

At the same time, since March the law stipulates that this data is no longer subject to the public right to information. The standard retention period has been limited to a maximum of 21 days, with exceptions for purposes such as investigations. Access must be logged, and Washington prohibits various forms of data sharing. However, citizens can no longer request the actual vehicle data under the Public Records Act. This provides a precedent that is far more relevant to Europe than any simple data privacy debate. The crucial question doesn't begin with the first camera. It begins where more and more cameras record the same vehicles, data remains available for longer periods, and more and more authorities can search the same systems.

Brussels is already examining the expanded use of automatic license plate recognition and a stronger connection to the SIS. Germany scans license plates during investigations, while Austria is installing cameras for municipal access control. In the US, cities are now struggling to regain control of a long-established surveillance network. Europe should observe this experiment very closely before the roadside license plate scanner becomes a motion detector for the entire continent.