

Why Putin Despises Snowden

By [Michael Bohm](#)

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When Edward Snowden, with the assistance of his curators in the Russian government, held his makeshift news conference last Friday in Sheremetyevo Airport's transit zone, it was no surprise that pro-Kremlin opinion makers dominated the short, invitation-only list of attendees. Among them were prominent lawyer and Public Chamber member Anatoly Kucherena, political analyst and State Duma Deputy Vyacheslav Nikonov and human rights ombudsmen Vladimir Lukin. Basking in the spotlight amid Snowden's sudden reappearance after nearly a month of being incognito in the airport's transit zone, they took full advantage of this PR opportunity, explaining to several hundred journalists on hand that Russia should offer Snowden political asylum because he is a refugee of U.S. repression.

"Snowden is not a criminal," Lukin said, "and deserves asylum status."

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called "swine."

"He deserves protection," Kucherena said. "We need to defend him. I consider him a hero. ... [The U.S. government] is persecuting him."

This kind of demagoguery is expected from Kremlin loyalists. But what was surprising and disheartening was that the Moscow-based directors of two respected global rights organizations, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, joined the chorus of support for Snowden's quest to receive political asylum. It was unsettling to see these organizations in full solidarity with Kremlin spin doctors. Indeed, the two groups make strange bedfellows, particularly considering that these NGOs have been victims of government harassment and a state-sponsored smear campaign that depicts them as U.S.-paid agents.

These ardent Snowden supporters fail to understand a fundamental principle in asylum jurisprudence: Political asylum should be granted in cases of persecution, not prosecution. To qualify for asylum, Snowden must produce evidence that he is being persecuted based on his political opinion, race, religion, nationality or membership in a particular social group. These are United Nations and internationally recognized categories to determine the legitimacy of a person's asylum request. Asylum should not be granted to suspected criminals like Snowden who are simply trying to avoid a jail sentence in their home country.

A good example of a legitimate asylum seeker would be Leonid Razvozhayev, an opposition leader who fled to Ukraine in October to escape political persecution in Russia. When Razvozhayev tried to seek political asylum in the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in Kiev, he was seized by masked men believed to be Russian intelligence agents, handcuffed and dragged back to Moscow, where he is still being held in pretrial detention on trumped-up charges of "plotting riots." In this case, both Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch were correct in protesting Razvozhayev's kidnapping, detention and prosecution.

Most Snowden supporters in Russia agree that Snowden broke the law by leaking classified information but say there is a higher law — a moral law — that justifies his decision to expose massive surveillance by the National Security Agency that Americans and the entire world had a right to know about. His actions, the argument goes, amounted to civil disobedience in the spirit of U.S. civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr.

But these Snowden advocates are missing two key differences: King, a Noble Peace Prize laureate, did not flee the U.S., and he worked within the democratic system to push for human rights legislation that addressed the immorality of existing segregation laws. Snowden, too, should have also worked within the U.S. legal system to declassify the NSA programs, thus subjecting them to larger public scrutiny, instead of engaging in criminal cyber-vigilantism.

Snowden claims to be a whistleblower, but he is far from one. Unlike real whistleblowers —

such as Daniel Ellsberg, who leaked the Pentagon Papers in 1971 — Snowden did not reveal anything illegal in the NSA surveillance programs and thus cannot be protected under U.S. whistleblower laws. His sole position was that he was against the NSA surveillance programs and thought they should be declassified.

But Snowden's personal dislike of the NSA programs is not sufficient grounds to leak classified information. This is precisely why he is a criminal, not a whistleblower. According to Snowden's logic, a pedophile who doesn't like anti-pedophile laws would have the same self-anointed right to violate the law on the grounds that it also contradicts his or her personal values.

While pro-Kremlin spin doctors are having a heyday with Snowden's extended stay in Moscow and are enthusiastic about the opportunity to give him asylum, President Vladimir Putin remains highly unenthusiastic, to say the least, about Snowden's presence in the country for two main reasons.

First, Putin has a strong dislike for human rights activists as a class, especially those working in Russia. They hardly mix well with his vertical power structure. Putin may like activists more when they reveal rights abuses in the U.S., but having someone like Snowden living in Russia and becoming cozy with Russian-based rights groups, who have their own long laundry lists of abuses committed by Putin's regime, probably makes Putin a bit uneasy.

Last week, pro-Kremlin defense analyst Igor Korotchenko said in an interview with state-controlled Russia 24 television that if Snowden receives asylum in Russia, "he will have a fabulous opportunity to continue his human rights activities, including battling against the state's interference in private lives."

The problem, though, is that if Snowden were to turn his attention toward Russia's poor record on human rights, government transparency and privacy protection, Russia could easily get more than it bargained for with Snowden. After all, Putin's condition for giving Snowden political asylum was that he refrain from inflicting more damage on the United States. Putin said nothing about Russia.

This situation is complicated by the fact that Russian authorities are keen on expanding surveillance of Russians who use Google, YouTube, Skype and Facebook, the preferred site for organizing protests. These foreign companies, unlike Russian ones such as Yandex, are largely out of the reach of the Federal Security Service, or FSB, since their servers are located in the U.S. Thus, the Kremlin is trying to force these U.S.-based companies to give the FSB direct, unlimited access to their servers as a condition for them being able to operate in the country. Snowden, whose main mission was to fight the "U.S. surveillance state," would likely have trouble swallowing this exponentially larger surveillance state in Russia.

Given Snowden's apparent obsession with privacy rights and government transparency, Putin doesn't trust him. There is no guarantee that Snowden would remain silent about the FSB's widespread spying abuses, which make even the NSA's worst abuses look like child's play. (For example, the e-mails and telephone conversations of opposition leader Alexei Navalny, who was sentenced to five years in prison on Thursday, were regularly hacked, even before charges were filed against him.) And once Snowden received asylum status, even Putin would have trouble taking it away if Snowden got out of hand.

The second reason Putin, a former KGB agent, is wary about Snowden is because Putin remains religiously faithful to the lifetime oath he took: Never give away state secrets. Whatever initial gratification he might have experienced when Snowden revealed U.S. government abuses was quickly replaced by a sense of disdain for Snowden, who betrayed his nation. For this reason alone, Putin clearly considers Snowden a traitor, not a hero.

Putin put it best in 2010, when he spoke of an informant who gave away 10 Russian sleeper agents operating in the U.S.: "Traitors are swine. ... The lives of traitors always end badly." And this is precisely why Putin said that the sooner Snowden leaves Russia, the better.

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