



Sorry, Snowden: Putin Lied to You About His Surveillance State—And Made You a Pawn of It

By: Eli Lake

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In a bizarre televised appearance the NSA whistleblower now resident in Russia asked Putin if he spied on his own citizens the way the Americans do on theirs. Putin, predictably, said no.

This story has been updated to reflect comments from Edward Snowden's American lawyer.

Vladimir Putin just trolled President Barack Obama and the entire U.S. intelligence community. He trolled them hard. On live [Russian television](#) Edward Snowden, the former NSA contractor who exposed America's dragnet surveillance of call records and internet traffic, asked the Russian leader whether Moscow does the same: "Does Russia intercept, store or analyze in any way the communications of millions of individuals?"

Not to worry, Putin tells America's most famous intelligence leaker: "We don't have a mass system for such interception and according to our law it cannot exist."

That statement may be true in a parallel universe where Crimean citizens all on their own with no orchestration from Russia spontaneously voted to join the Russian federation after random mercenaries with no ties to Moscow seized its airports and government buildings. But in the world as it is, it's just an outrageous lie, according to independent experts interviewed by The Daily Beast.

"I think it was ridiculous," says Mark Galeotti, an expert on Russia's security services who is also a professor at New York University. Andrei Soldatov, a Russian journalist who has broken major stories on the Russian intelligence service, the FSB, and is a Daily Beast contributor, was only slightly more charitable. "Putin never directly lies, he just tells half truths and his answer was a half truth," he said. "In terms of what is going on inside the country, he was not correct. We have all signs of mass surveillance. My view is Russian surveillance is much more intrusive than what you have in the United States."

To be sure Galeotti and Soldatov both said Russia's *laws* on intercepting communications contain pro forma prohibitions on mass surveillance collection. Soldatov also said it was true that Russian technology for storing and intercepting communications intelligence was not as

advanced as that used by the Americans. (“Russia does not have as much money to spend on this as they do in the States,” Putin said with a smile.)

President Obama has signaled that he is now willing to end the National Security Agency’s mass collection of the call records exposed by Snowden last year. Neither Galeotti nor Soldatov said the Russians operated a database on that level.

But the FSB has far more power to eavesdrop on Russian and foreign citizens than the FBI or the NSA. In practice, according to Soldatov, the FSB has a back door into every server belonging to Russia’s telecom companies and Internet service provider. Snowden himself exposed a program known as PRISM that provided these so-called back doors to the NSA in the United States. The Office of the Director of National Intelligence last year published court records that showed in some cases the collection of Internet traffic targeted at foreign nationals inadvertently collected the Internet traffic of U.S. citizens for whom the agency had no warrant.

But in Russia, there is no special court or even a parliamentary committee to check the FSB’s work in the first place. “The interception is conducted by the ISP internet provider and not the law enforcement agency in the United States,” Soldatov said. “In Russia interception is conducted by the FSB directly. They have remote access to all Internet service providers and all telecom companies and they don’t have to even ask permission to view any of this data. While the NSA has collected all call records to search themselves, the FSB can actually listen to the content of phone calls without a warrant. Nobody would ask for this warrant because the ISP has no security clearance to see the warrant.”

Russian communications monitoring became even more intrusive earlier this year during the Sochi winter games. It was widely reported at the time that nearly every text, phone call and email was being monitored during the games because of the heightened risk of a terror attack from regional separatist groups.

“They used Sochi as a test case for a more intrusive system,” Galeotti said. “This was emails, text messages and voice calls. They required telecom providers to store all phone conversations, text messages, everything for 24 hours.”

Putin’s snooping is not limited to his own citizens. As The Daily Beast [reported last month](#) the Russian intelligence services are widely believed to be behind a spate of recorded phone conversations of western and Ukrainian officials that have mysteriously surfaced on the Internet and then been reported on by Russian government media like RT, the English language television network directly funded by the Kremlin.

Not surprising it was RT that broadcast the Russian-style town hall meeting where Snowden serendipitously emerged to ask Putin his canned question on Thursday.

The cache of top secret documents Snowden provided to journalists Glenn Greenwald, Laura Poitras and Barton Gellman have provided a string of extraordinary stories about NSA’s mass surveillance. Last week the Pulitzer committee announced that those reporters, along with their

outlets—the *Guardian* and *The Washington Post*—had won the prestigious Pulitzer for public service journalism.

The prize is a powerful rebuke to some members of Congress and others who have suggested that Snowden is at best a defector and at worst a spy for a foreign government.

Snowden and his defenders have repeatedly said the former NSA contractor does not control the master files of intelligence documents he originally took from the U.S. intelligence community even if he wanted to hand them over to Russian intelligence. Thus far no U.S. official has provided any public evidence to suggest that Snowden was a paid foreign agent when he took those documents.

But on Thursday Snowden looked to some like he was participating in a Soviet-style propaganda play. “Whatever else Snowden might think he has been doing, surely he must understand he was just used as a prop by the president of the Russian federation,” said Michael Hayden, a former NSA and CIA director under the George W. Bush administration who has been one of his former agency’s most ardent public defenders. Benjamin Wittes, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution who has also been critical of Snowden and the journalism his leaks have helped produce said, “It speaks volumes that Snowden lends his name to Putin’s propaganda efforts.”

Galeotti says he found the display of Snowden’s question for Putin on eavesdropping to be depressing. “I believed he was an honest man who made some stupid choices,” says Galeotti. “But in this case he was doing what was in his handler’s interests.”

“We have to think of two Snowdens,” Galeotti tells *The Daily Beast*. “There was the original whistleblower who thought he was doing something good for the world. Now there is the Snowden—to put it crassly—who is bought and paid for entirely by the Russians. The Russians are not altruistic, if they are protecting him they are doing so because there are things he can do to repay them.”

But not everyone viewed Snowden’s appearance with Putin so negatively. Jesselyn Radack, one of Snowden’s American lawyers, said, “Unfortunately it can play into the incorrect meme that he is somehow being controlled by Russia.” Radack added however that Snowden’s question should not be judged by Putin’s response. “The public is capable of making their own determination of whether they find Putin or Obama credible. It’s not that bizarre or sensational that he asked the question.”

Julian Sanchez, a research fellow at the Cato Institute who has written extensively on government surveillance, said “The best you can say about this is he may have thought he was trying to broaden the conversation to talk about Russian surveillance. If that is the case, this is probably a naïve way to go about it.” Sanchez said Snowden began “a healthy conversation for us in the United States to be having about mass scale government surveillance. It would be equally healthy for the Russians to have a similarly open conversation.”

One problem for Snowden now is that he is at the mercy of the Russian government. In June Snowden will likely have to reapply for temporary asylum again in Russia. “The United States

has stranded him in Russia by revoking his passport and making him dependent on the good will of Putin," Radack said. "He is not being controlled by Russia and he is certainly not a spy. Anyone who would use his question to try to portray him in that way is not really paying attention to what is happening in our own country." But Radack said that Snowden would ideally like to return to the United States, but will not return to face the charges against him filed under the Espionage Act. "He's a patriotic American," she said. "He would love nothing more than to be able to come home under the right circumstances."

Soldatov said Snowden's question could lift a de facto ban in Russia on public conversations about the state's eavesdropping. "Before this question both Snowden and Greenwald refused to talk about surveillance in Russia," he said. "Now we can ask Greenwald about this. Now we can start the debate. This is extremely important for Russia. I suspect Kremlin propaganda wanted to play Snowden, nevertheless this was a positive thing because it helps us to start the debate about the mass surveillance in Russia."