

Russia Slams U.S. Pressure Over Snowden

By [Ivan Nechepurenko](#)

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Snowden on a television screen in a cafe in Sheremetyevo airport, where he looks likely to stay for some time yet. **Tatyana Makeyeva**

Russian officials and human rights activists on Thursday slammed the U.S. for “threatening Russia” in a bid to have former NSA contractor Edward Snowden returned, as suspense mounts over the fugitive’s impending departure from Sheremetyevo Airport.

“They [the U.S.] are asking Russia to discriminate against a U.S. citizen who has turned to Russia for temporary asylum and thus blatantly violate human rights,” Anatoly Kucherena, a lawyer who is currently advising Snowden on immigration and other issues, told Interfax.

In an unusual demonstration of solidarity with the government-connected lawyer, Svetlana Gannushkina, a prominent independent human rights activist who was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2010, said: “I do not like the way they [the U.S.] are behaving. They are pressuring [us] too much and literally threatening Russia,” she said.

The statements come a day after reports that Snowden would soon be leaving the airport sent international media into a frenzy and prompted the U.S. to demand clarification from Moscow on Snowden's asylum status, which, it soon became clear, was still pending.

The U.S. government has repeatedly tried to convince Russia to send Snowden back to the U.S. to face charges, but the situation remains at an impasse, and Russia has cited the absence of a bilateral extradition treaty with the U.S. as the reason for its inaction on the matter.

Moscow and Washington agreed in 2007 to draft an agreement for the extradition of criminal suspects, but there was no further progress on the document despite Russia's calls to complete the process.

Russia's Justice Minister Alexander Konovalov said in February 2012, when the issue was raised again, that "the U.S. side remains reluctant to accept our proposals."

Alexander Kukharev, a Moscow-based lawyer specializing in extradition cases, said the lack of such a formal agreement greatly complicates the situation.

"There have been precedents of the U.S. passing Russian citizens on to Russia, but since there is no agreement, this was done in the form of deportation for the violation of U.S. immigration law," he said.

U.S. Ambassador to Russia Michael McFaul, however, said Thursday that the U.S. was not seeking the extradition "but simply the return of Mr. Snowden," according to his Twitter page.

During an earlier meeting with Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry said the U.S. handed 1,754 individuals over to Russia from 2007 to 2012 and was ready to hand over 101 more, an unidentified source in the Foreign Ministry told Interfax.

But when Russia asked for a list with names, the U.S. was not able to provide it, the source said.

Valery Garbuzov, deputy director of the Institute for U.S. and Canadian Studies in Moscow, said the apparent gridlock was not much of a surprise.

"This is a political game with no clear answers," Garbuzov said.

If that is the case and there are no win-win solutions to the Snowden situation, it seems that Russia may be trying to mitigate the consequences of Snowden's possible long-term stay in Russia.

President Vladimir Putin has repeatedly stressed that Snowden's situation must not harm U.S. Russia ties, even publicly stating that Snowden's asylum application would only be considered if he promised to stop leaking information that may be damaging to the U.S.

And despite many Russian officials and activists saying Snowden has the right to asylum, Russia has so far been reluctant to let him into the country too quickly. He may even be kept in extraterritorial limbo for at least another month, until the G20 Summit in St. Petersburg, which is expected to be attended by U.S. President Barack Obama.

Wednesday's meeting between Kucherena and Snowden — at which Snowden reportedly told his lawyer he planned to stay in Russia for the long term and maybe even seek employment — marked a departure from the whistle-blower's earlier declared plans, when he said he would ultimately travel to Latin America.

After the meeting, Kucherena told reporters that Snowden may end up settling down in Russia for good, as he intended to learn the language and study the culture.

And judging by some of the gifts Snowden received from his lawyer, it seems the two are well aware of the long wait ahead as Russia figures out how to resolve the situation without damaging U.S.-Russia relations.

“It is clear that the government is putting off making a definite decision, and given the number of books that Mr. Kucherena brought to the airport, Snowden might stay there for a while,” Garbuzov said.

Apart from guidebooks, Kucherena also brought the fugitive a novel by Fyodor Dostoevsky and a collection of stories by Anton Chekhov — something that can take weeks to read.

Contact the author at i.nechepurenko@imedia.ru

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