

Did Kremlin Arrange Snowden's Trip to Russia?

By [James Brooke](#)

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June 21 was the hottest day of the year in Hong Kong: a sweltering 34 degrees Celsius. But it was also a hot day for Edward Snowden, the leaker of U.S. secrets, hiding out in China's special administrative region.

On that day in Washington, U.S. federal prosecutors officially brought charges against Snowden for unauthorized communication of classified and national defense information, both of which fell under the U.S. Espionage Act.

On that day in Hong Kong, Snowden received a one-way ticket to Moscow on Aeroflot, Russia's state-controlled flag carrier. As Kommersant reported Monday, citing Russian sources, Snowden also celebrated his 30th birthday in the safety of his new refuge, the Russian consulate in Hong Kong.

Russian officials

may have
approached
Snowden in Hong
Kong with
the idea of flying
to Russia.

Located on the 21st floor of a steel and glass skyscraper, the Russian consulate offered more than a stunning view of Victoria Harbor. It also offered Snowden refuge from a U.S. arrest warrant.

For two days, Snowden stayed at the 17-room Russian consulate before being whisked away by car in the early morning hours June 23 for the 10-hour Aeroflot flight to Moscow.

From the start of Snowden's saga, Russian officials have always claimed that they were surprised by Snowden's arrival June 23 at Moscow's Sheremetyevo Airport.

"It is true that Mr. Snowden arrived in Moscow, and it really came as a surprise to us," President Vladimir Putin told reporters in Finland on June 25. "Any accusations against Russia [of aiding him] are rubbish." Later, Putin called Snowden "an unwanted Christmas present."

Sources in Moscow differ on how Snowden ended up in Russia's care. Some say the Chinese wanted to get rid of him and suggested that he turn to the Russian consulate. Others say Russian officials themselves contacted Snowden at The Mira, the luxury hotel where he was staying in Hong Kong. Another version is that Snowden went to the consulate on his own.

Julian Assange, the founder of WikiLeaks, said June 24 that WikiLeaks paid Snowden's hotel bill in Hong Kong and bought the Aeroflot ticket for him with a Hong Kong-Moscow-Havana itinerary.

Assange has a special relationship with RT, the Kremlin-funded television channel. Last year, RT hired Assange to host a political talk show. The channel gives heavy and generously favorable coverage to Assange, Snowden and the other U.S. leaker in the news, Bradley Manning.

Kommersant and other Russian media dwelled on why Snowden never used the second half of his Aeroflot ticket, from Moscow to Havana. The Russian media said Moscow got stuck with Snowden because Washington pressured Havana to refuse him.

To be sure, Havana has been conspicuously quiet on the Snowden affair. Soviet-generation Russians remember Cuba as the nation that gave refuge to hijackers of U.S. airlines well into the 1980s.

But change comes even to Cuba, ruled for the last half century by the Castro brothers. In June, President Raul Castro turned 82. Apparently, Cuba's new generation wants a fresh start with Washington. For Havana, giving refuge to the United States' most-wanted man is a throwback to the 1960s.

Snowden spent almost six weeks in Sheremetyevo, Moscow's busiest international airport, reportedly in the transit area. Snowden's stay there was handled very professionally. There were no leaks, no e-mails to reporters and no late-night telephone calls to his parents or his girlfriend in Hawaii. About 3.5 million passengers flowed in and out of the airport during that time, and, amazingly, there were no credible Snowden sightings.

His legal limbo apparently dragged on because Alexander Bortnikov, director of the Federal Security Service, hinted to Washington that a spy trade might be possible..

The only time Snowden was sighted was July 12 during a carefully choreographed meeting with directors of several nongovernmental organizations, a few lawyers and pro-Kremlin politicians. Reporters were not invited.

Anatoly Kucherena was one of the lawyers invited to the meeting. Several days later, Kucherena announced that he was selected by Snowden to become his lawyer and spokesman. Kucherena advised Snowden to drop his 20 or so asylum requests to other countries and focus on Russia.

Kucherena has an interesting background. Two years ago, Putin picked Kucherena to serve on the Public Chamber, a pro-Kremlin government oversight body. Putin also chose Kucherena to serve on a board that oversees the FSB.

On the Snowden case, Kucherena's legal advice proved solid. On Aug. 1, Snowden was granted a year's temporary asylum in Russia. That day, he and Sarah Harrison, his WikiLeaks traveling companion, left the airport and have not been seen in public since.

Within hours after Snowden's departure, WikiLeaks issued a statement thanking the Russian government. Assange added: "This is another victory in the fight against Obama's war on whistleblowers. This battle has been won, but the war continues."

Several days before Snowden arrived in Moscow, the South China Morning Post published an interview that had taken place earlier in Hong Kong. In the interview, Snowden said he joined Booz Allen Hamilton, the contractor with the National Security Agency, with the sole purpose of using his security clearance to steal the U.S. government's cyber spying secrets.

Now that Snowden and his four NSA laptop computers are in the safekeeping of the Kremlin, one question begs an answer: When exactly did the Kremlin enter Snowden's life?

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