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FSB Makes Eavesdropping an Olympic Event

By Andrei Soldatov

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The Olympic Games in Sochi have helped the Federal Security Service, or FSB, achieve the impossible. Following the disclosures by National Security Agency leaker Edward Snowden, the global debate over electronic surveillance focused largely on the NSA. Special mention for electronic espionage also went to the "five eyes" of the intelligence alliance between Britain, the U.S., Canada, New Zealand and Australia — infamous ever since the Echelon program ushered in the era of global electronic surveillance. For months, the debate has focused on the operations and espionage programs conducted by the intelligence agencies of those countries. But a new player has appeared on the global stage: Russia's Federal Security System and SORM, Russia's system for intercepting telephone and electronic communications.

Russia's total electronic surveillance system for the Olympics has put this country's intelligence agencies in the spotlight alongside the FSB.

The Kremlin not only did not deny allegations of illegal spying. They seemed to be proud of it.

The Kremlin had a surprising reaction to the article that my colleague, Irina Borogan, and I published in The Guardian that detailed our investigation into the surveillance system in Sochi. A headline on the pro-Kremlin Voice of Russia site aimed at an English-speaking audience expressed it best: "Don't be scared of phone tapping during Sochi. It's for your own safety." Thus, nobody denied the results of our investigation. On the contrary, the authorities seemed to flaunt their electronic eavesdropping capabilities.

Our suspicions were confirmed one month later when Rossiiskaya Gazeta published a government decree signed by Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev that effectively announced plans to collect metadata from all Olympics participants, including athletes, event judges and journalists. Once again, the authorities made no attempt to hide the fact they would not only create a special database, but that the information would be stored for three years after the event and FSB agents would have access to that information 24/7.

Apparently, the authorities were hoping that after hearing reports of the SORM program, upgraded for the Games, record 11,000 CCTV cameras in place as well as the surveillance blimps and drones patrolling the skies, activists would think twice before staging any demonstrations in Sochi and journalists would cancel plans to cover their rallies. Now they have to consider that all of their communications will be intercepted and stored for the next three years for the FSB to decipher and analyze at their leisure.

It is too early to say whether the tactics of the FSB at the Olympics will prove effective, but those measures have already produced at least one result. One week after The Guardian published our article, three European Parliament members sent the European Commission and the Council of Europe a written request for information on the electronic surveillance of European citizens at the Olympic Games in Sochi. By then, the European Parliament had already been investigating the mass surveillance of European Union citizens by U.S. and British intelligence agencies. But the Committee of Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs of the European Parliament held a special meeting on Jan. 22 to discuss Russia's SORM electronic surveillance system.

Television viewers have been inundated with reports about electronic surveillance at Sochi. That topic gets about equal airtime with the subject of security at the Games, with both only slightly less popular than the subject of corruption in the construction of Olympics facilities. In fact, security and surveillance have become almost inseparable subjects. Last spring, the U.S. State Department warned U.S. citizens planning to attend the Olympics that they could forget about having any privacy during the Games, and advised them to leave their smartphones and laptops at home.

NBC correspondent Richard Engel only days ago ran a high-profile story on how a smartphone and two laptops that he brought to Moscow were hacked almost immediately after he used public Wi-Fi in Russia. Engel even turned to a computer security specialist who had come to Moscow to check the security of Russia's electronic communications.

This not only proves the professionalism of Russian hackers but also calls to mind that ever since 2011, the FSB has required Western firms supplying equipment for public Wi-Fi networks in Russia to import specially adapted controllers with the encryption function disabled.

Even with SORM, the Russian electronic surveillance system cannot compare with the scale of the U.S. program — but not for lack of desire by the FSB. Most people prefer to use more technologically advanced U.S. services such as Google, Twitter and Facebook and to access them using U.S.-made Apple devices. Meanwhile, only the residents of the former Soviet republics use Vkontakte. Even in Moscow, people have not exactly been lining up to buy smartphones manufactured in Russia. SORM only gives the FSB access to services physically hosted on Russian territory.

Meanwhile, human rights activists have suggested that the global community focus its criticism mostly on U.S. intelligence agencies. They argue that the global reach of Washington's surveillance activities poses a far greater threat to people everywhere than Russian and Chinese surveillance systems that are confined to geographically smaller territories.

That might be true, but it will do little to allay the concerns of guests arriving during the next three weeks for the Olympic Games.

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