

That One Time the FSB in Sochi Invited Me for a Chat

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FSB Office in Sochi **Ivan Nechepurenko**

SOCHI — Sergei Polukhin is a massive bald man in his forties, dressed in a black shirt and stylish leather shoes. He is also a senior lieutenant in the Federal Security Service, the successor to the KGB and the government body widely seen as the most omnipotent in Russia.

In a strange turn of events, Polukhin invited me to the FSB's Sochi office. It was an invitation that would leave most people terrified, but, fortunately for me, it was a cordial invite in response to an information request I had submitted weeks earlier for a story on a possible suicide bomber.

At that time, I was seeking information on reports that Ruzana Ibragimova, an alleged suicide bomber, managed to get into Sochi from Dagestan on Jan. 20. The news of the possibly imminent terrorist attack triggered panic in the Western media then, and security officials

seemed eager to put those fears to rest.

But Polukhin was oddly forthcoming about the situation when we met.

"We still have not found her," he said, adding, however, that "she might have never left Dagestan in the first place."

There was good reason for security services to be concerned ahead of the Games. The southern city of Volgograd was hit by three suicide bombings within a matter of months at the end of 2013, exacerbating fears that had already dominated headlines in the run-up to the Winter Olympics, now in full swing in Sochi.

Apparently doing his due diligence, Polukhin asked me how I had learned of Ibragimova's possible presence in the area weeks earlier.

A photo of a wanted notice had been published on the local Blogsochi.ru website, I told him.

I met Polukhin in front of the FSB office, the only building in Sochi that resembles a modern fortress, with high walls and cameras around the perimeter. Before we walked in, Polukhin took me to his car to pick up a few documents.

I decided to take advantage of the lack of possible recording devices at this moment and ask him some questions.

First, in response to a question about security at the Games, Polukhin told me that the agency is constantly monitoring the situation and there is no immediate threat.

I was not surprised to hear about diligent monitoring, as even tourists heading to the Olympic Games were warned by the U.S. State Department in advance that they should expect no privacy in Sochi, with all Internet and telephone communications to be tracked by Russia's security services.

Polukhin said that even entry into Sochi was strict.

"Before the Olympics everyone was checked and people without proper paperwork were asked to vacate the area," he said.

The FSB checks every visitor that comes to the Olympics and along with other law enforcement agencies approves the spectator passes that let you into the Olympic venues, he said. Some political activists, among others, were denied the pass and given no explanation for the refusal.

Despite criticism over the activists being barred entry, Polukhin said the agency had done everything by the book.

"Everything we do is done in accordance with the law," he said. "You do not even have to ask what we do; it is all written in the law."

For those curious to know what it is like to be in an FSB building, I can now tell you: just to enter, everybody has to go through a buffer zone. There are five doors at the entrance, after

which you appear in a small booth with a camera in it, where people are supposedly screened.

Then you find yourself in a hall with a portrait of Felix Dzerzhinsky, the former head of the Soviet secret police, peering out at you from a plaque on the wall.

After passing through this hall, Polukhin and I walked to a small room, which he locked after we entered, and then we continued our discussion.

Many journalists in Russia believe that their phones are tapped by the FSB and that the agency keeps a dossier on everybody containing more information about these people than they know themselves.

But Polukhin was quick to debunk this myth.

"If you do not do anything illegal then there is no tapping," he said.

"Overall, it is very difficult to tap somebody's phone."

He gave me a piece of paper about my earlier information request that said the FSB had "taken the information into consideration."

I then had to sign a few documents describing the situation: how I submitted the request, how the agency reacted to it and how there were no further measures taken.

While signing these documents, I decided to ask Polukhin about some other ideas journalists have about the FSB.

So I asked him about the agency's special "Center E" department, a controversial department that deals with extremism, a charge which many cases believed to be politically motivated are turned into.

"I do not deal with this stuff, it is not within my area of responsibility," Polukhin said.

Oddly, at this very moment I happened to overhear a woman being questioned in the other room. The investigator kept asking her about her relative, who had supposedly gone to Syria, where many militants from the North Caucasus are believed to have gone to fight Syrian President Bashar Assad's forces.

"Does he know what is going on out there?" the investigator asked her. That was all I could hear before it went quiet.

I signed all the papers in front of me and Polukhin let me out, shaking my hand and telling me to call if I have any more questions.

Maybe I will, I thought, as the gate closed behind me with a screech.

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