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Snowden Defends Question to Putin in Op-Ed

By Christopher Brennan

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Journalists listen to a speech and a question posed by former U.S. spy agency NSA contractor Edward Snowden, at a media centre during Russian President Vladimir Putin's live broadcast nationwide phone-in, in Moscow April 17, 2014.

U.S. intelligence leaker Edward Snowden defended his question to President Vladimir Putin in The Guardian on Friday, a day after he asked the Russian president about government surveillance in Russia.

Snowden, coordinating with The Guardian through the Freedom of the Press Foundation, said in an op-ed that he asked Putin whether Russia ran a widespread surveillance program to get him on the record denying the suspected activities, adding that his answer was "suspiciously narrow" and "evasive."

After a somewhat lengthy conferral with the television presenter for a Russian rephrasing

of Snowden's English question, Putin answered by drawing a comparison between the whistleblower's experience at the U.S. National Security Agency and his own time with the KGB and saying that Russia only uses limited surveillance when approved by a court order.

The question brought Snowden a wave of criticism from Western observers, with Economist editor Edward Lucas telling The Wall Street Journal that the question made him "look like a propaganda patsy of the Kremlin."

Snowden said in his op-ed that he knows his appearance "could be misinterpreted," but said that it was "rare opportunity to lift a taboo on discussion of state surveillance before an audience that primarily views state media outweighed that risk."

While Snowden hoped that Russian media would take up the task of challenging inconsistencies in Putin's response, others have been disappointed by the lack of attention to the content in the president's answer.

Andrei Soldatov, a journalist mentioned by Snowden as a prominent critic of the Russian surveillance system, posted on his Twitter account Friday: "Something about the society we live in: while Snowden's question to Putin is hotly debated in English, I don't see much of debate in Russian."

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>
> — Andrei Soldatov (@AndreiSoldatov) April 18, 2014

Soldatov expressed a desire for Snowden to be further involved in demystifying government surveillance, posting, "Great that Snowden and I may comment on each other's comments, hope one day he'll be ready to talk to [Russian] journalists."

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