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U.S. Leaker Edward Snowden Says He Is Not a Russian Spy

By Allison Quinn

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Former U.S. National Security Agency contractor Edward Snowden

U.S. fugitive Edward Snowden has denied allegations that his life in Russia is controlled by the security services, saying he "wouldn't play ball" when he first came to Russia and continues to remain unscathed only because of his public profile.

Snowden's comments were made during a Q&A session hosted Monday on the popular Internet community Reddit. He was joined by journalist Glenn Greenwald and filmmaker Laura Poitras, who a day earlier picked up an Academy Award for her film "Citizenfour," which recounted a series of interviews with Snowden in Hong Kong, where he handed over classified NSA documents to Poitras and Greenwald.

Asked whether it was accurate to say Russian security services controlled his life in Russia, Snowden replied: "The answer is 'of course not.' You'll notice in all of these articles, the assertions ultimately come down to speculation and suspicion. None of them claim

to have any actual proof, they're just so damned sure I'm a Russian spy that it must be true."

Snowden, a former contractor for the National Security Agency (NSA) who exposed the U.S. government's mass surveillance programs, has been living in exile in Russia since 2013 to avoid the espionage charges he faces in the United States. Russian authorities granted him a three-year residency permit last year.

Ever since his move to Russia, speculation about his involvement with Russian intelligence services has run rife. In mid-January, WikiLeaks staffer Sarah Harrison told the Associated Press that Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB) had approached Snowden in 2013 but that he turned down their offer.

Snowden himself conceded in last night's Q&A that he could understand why people would wonder about where his allegiances lay but said that ultimately such claims simply did not make sense.

"If I were a Russian spy, why [first] go to Hong Kong? It would have been an unacceptable risk. And further — why give any information to journalists at all, for that matter, much less so much and of such importance? Any intelligence value it would have to the Russians would be immediately compromised."

He added that if he was a Russian spy, he would not have been trapped for almost a month in Moscow's Sheremetyevo Airport upon arriving in Russia, but instead "would have gotten a parade and a medal."

"The reality is I spent so long in that damn airport because I wouldn't play ball and nobody knew what to do with me," he said.

Snowden did not rule out the possibility of being used as leverage in negotiations between the United States and Russia over the Ukraine crisis, saying: "It is very realistic that in the realpolitik of great powers, this kind of thing could happen. I don't like to think that it would happen, but it certainly could."

The Monday event, known as an AMA — or Ask Me Anything — is a regular feature on Reddit. To prove it was actually Snowden answering the questions, a photo was uploaded to the forum of him holding up a piece of paper with the words "Laura [Poitras] won an Oscar!" and the date Feb. 23.

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