

Chapter 10. The Snowden Affair

In the 1990s the global nature of the Internet meant wires. When a user got connected, he could send his e-mail or visit a website anywhere in the world. In the 2000s the Internet meant the rise of global platforms that allowed users to share the same social networks, e-mail services, search engines, and clouds. The Internet became more of a common ground for people from Argentina to Russia—they used the same Facebook, the same Twitter. That also meant that the information users exchanged was stored inside systems located far from the users—systems that could not be readily controlled by nations, their leaders, or their secret services. Most of the servers were located in the United States.

For President Vladimir Putin this was intolerable. In his mind the solution was simple: force the platforms—Facebook, Google, Twitter, and Apple among them—to locate their servers on Russian soil so Russian authorities could control them.

The challenge was how to do it.

Since November 2012 Russia had censored and controlled the Internet extensively by using a nationwide system of filtering, but it was primitive. Rather than being based on key words, as in China, it was based on a blacklist of Internet sites in various forms. The blacklist could block Internet protocol or IP addresses, a set of numbers, such as 70.226.194; URLs, an address of a particular page, like www.agentura.ru/english; or domain names, such as google.com. The Federal Agency for Supervision of Communications, or Roskomnadzor, maintained the blacklist, was instrumental in dealing with the digital companies in Russia, and was in charge of implementing the filtering.

The head of the agency was Alexander Zharov, forty-eight, a soft-mannered

but ambitious man. A physician by training who had worked as an anesthesiologist and doctor in Chelyabinsk, he wrote articles for *Family Doctor* magazine in the 1990s and moved to Moscow to become the magazine's deputy editor. He then went into public relations, working for different government agencies, rising to become spokesman for a colorless Russian premier, Mikhail Fradkov, from 2004 to 2006. Along the way Zharov built important alliances with people in power, including Igor Shchegolev, a one-time TASS correspondent in Paris who, in 2008, was put in charge of a combined ministry of communications and the media under Putin. Shchegolev invited Zharov to be his deputy and put him in charge of the news media. Shchegolev and Zharov were roughly the same age and had both come into government from public relations; Shchegolev had also been spokesman for a prime minister, Yevgeny Primakov in 1998, and held prominent positions in the presidential administration in the years since. Most importantly, Shchegolev enjoyed direct access to Putin. Both he and Zharov settled into their ministry offices on Tverskaya Street in central Moscow.

When Putin returned to the Kremlin for a third term in May 2012, he took Shchegolev out of the ministry and appointed him presidential assistant in charge of the Internet. On May 3, 2012, Zharov was appointed chief of Roskomnadzor. He was considered Shchegolev's man, and he made the agency a powerful and semi-independent body, with three thousand employees and branches across the country. In the long back-and-forth between Putin and Medvedev, Zharov always carefully sided with Putin's people—a wise decision. Zharov's agency effectively took over governing the Internet in Russia, which by 2012 meant controlling it. The reins of power were held by him and Shchegolev, who mostly worked behind the scenes.

Zharov dreamed of becoming the minister, but he also was well aware that it would be risky for his career—and not so good for his chances to become minister—if he was seen as the chief Internet censor. Three weeks after Internet filtering was started in Russia, Zharov appeared on TV Dozhd and was interviewed for an hour. In response to tough questions from journalists about the blacklist, he insisted it was for combating pornography and narcotics and said he was only implementing the law. Near the end of the interview he said the blacklist

was updated every hour and at that moment included 591 banned sites. He managed to navigate the interview smoothly and, with a good sense of public relations, realized that the issue of Internet censorship could be a dark spot on his image.¹

He turned to a new deputy, Maxim Ksenzov, and handed over to him the task of dealing with filtering and censorship. Ksenzov, thirty-nine years old, was stiff and tense. A military engineer by training, he started his career at a research center of the Defense Ministry, then worked in information technology and communications, and by 2004 was in the ministry's licensing department for mass media. In July 2012 he was appointed deputy to Zharov at Roskomnadzor. In his public comments on Twitter, Ksenzov loyally expressed the agency's line that it only implemented the law. Ksenzov also made some efforts to explain to worried ISPs the techniques of filtration; he gave a number of informative question-and-answer sessions on web platforms.

It was not long before Zharov and Ksenzov realized the incredible power of the instrument they possessed.

In September 2012, weeks before the blacklist was put in place, the agency tried to block Internet access to the video "Innocence of Muslims"—the General Prosecutor's Office deemed it extremist. A court was to rule on it in October, but before the ruling, on September 17, Roskomnadzor "recommended" that Internet operators and media not disseminate the video. In a few days three major Russian telecom operators—VimpelCom, MegaFon, and MTS—all blocked access to the video on YouTube in the southern, mostly Muslim-populated region of the North Caucasus. Only MTS was able to block access to the specific page where the video was available; the first two operators blocked the entire YouTube service.²

This prompted not only Russian ISPs but also global platforms like Google to rush to Roskomnadzor for consultations. They were frightened that the primitive Russian system of filtering could end up blocking their entire service. Three days after Zharov's interview on TV Dozhd, on November 24, Roskomnadzor added the Internet protocol address of the entire Google Blogspot, a blogging platform, to the blacklist. Although it was soon removed, in that time Google users complained about the loss of some Gmail, Google Drive, and Google Play

functionality. However crude an instrument, the power of the blacklist was becoming more visible.

Eugene Kaspersky, who had been so dismissive of attacks on news media websites just two years before and had denied that cyber assaults even occurred, quietly changed his tune in March 2013. He came to the rescue of the troubled opposition newspaper, *Novaya Gazeta*, definitely not his most profitable client, when a tsunami of hacker traffic endangered it.

The newspaper was getting ready to celebrate its twentieth anniversary and had earned a reputation for critical coverage of the Kremlin and for thorough investigations—it expected some kind of electronic attack. The newspaper turned to Alexey Afanasyev, chief of the team working on preventing DDOS attacks at Kaspersky Lab. They had invented a traffic filtering system to counter the DDOS attacks used by pro-Kremlin hackers.³ *Novaya Gazeta* had never been an easy client of Kaspersky's, but Afanasyev grew up during Gorbachev's perestroika years and loved the newspaper, which had Gorbachev on its board. Afanasyev admired the paper's brave journalists and was ready to defend them.

In the late evening of March 31 Afanasyev was on his way home when a colleague called with the news that the website of *Novaya Gazeta* was under DDOS attack. The attack expanded after a few hours, but the newspaper's website remained online thanks to Afanasyev and his team's efforts, using the technology Kaspersky had developed to fight off bad traffic.

The next day, however, it got worse. The traffic from hackers exploded, and the attackers changed tactics. They launched a new type of assault called DNS amplification, a popular form of DDOS in which attackers use publicly accessible open DNS servers to flood a target system. Over two days it swamped *Novaya Gazeta* at a rate of more than one thousand times normal traffic.⁴ “That broke down two big data centers with our equipment, which filters incoming traffic,” Afanasyev recalled. He was in a shop buying some computer stuff when a colleague called, expressing fear that the attack could cause the entire Internet in

Moscow to collapse under the weight of the assault. The situation was critical, and Afanasyev decided to cut off all foreign traffic so that only users in Moscow could access *Novaya Gazeta*. By April 3 the attack reached a peak of sixty gigabits per second, an unheard of volume.

Kaspersky Lab asked two big telecom firms to help organize a special pathway for *Novaya Gazeta* in the Moscow Internet. They did, and it worked to isolate the newspaper from the digital chaos aimed at its website. At the attack's peak the website of *Novaya Gazeta* was out of service only for three hours—thanks largely to Kaspersky, who played an unlikely role. He believed that malware was evil and was ready to fight it, even if it meant defending a scrappy, critical newspaper like *Novaya Gazeta*.⁵

In March 2013 Roskomnadzor made its first direct assault on global social networks. The agency sent a warning to Twitter when it asked the social media site to block access to five tweets and close an account, saying the offending messages were advertising narcotics and promoting suicide. On March 15 Twitter reported that the company agreed to block the tweets and deleted the account.⁶ Roskomnadzor issued a special statement, expressing satisfaction with Twitter's "constructive position."⁷ Then, on March 28, Roskomnadzor notified Facebook that it would be blocked unless it removed a page called "Suicide School," which contained mostly humorous information about suicide. The site was added to Russia's blacklist. Facebook took down the offending page.⁸

Gradually the Russian authorities were exerting control over the Internet; Putin's people were moving in a coordinated way. Zharov and Ksenzov at Roskomnadzor issued warnings. Meanwhile the presidential administration, a separate government body directly under Putin, held private discussions with the leaders of the digital companies, like the one that Irina Levova had been invited to earlier. Also in attendance at those discussions were Russian lawmakers who were in charge of writing repressive laws for controlling the Internet.

On May 15, 2013, Ksenzov presented to Roskomnadzor a report outlining

the activities of the previous year, making it clear that he felt the government was gaining ground in its efforts to impose its will. There had been little resistance from ISPs or users. At the same time, Ksenzov expressed a worry—what if people figured out how to bypass the censorship? What if they could fool the filtering? There were methods to do this, he said, “that are relatively easy to use. . . . But the fact that it’s technically possible to bypass the blocking does not mean that in practice it will be done by everybody and everywhere.”⁹ Trying to be helpful, Ksenzov recommended the agency be further targeted by blacklisting both the Internet protocol number and the URL of those websites to be blocked.

Zharov was even more cheerful. “Despite the loud and sometimes shocking attacks against these laws, in general, the laws and working with them can be evaluated positively,” he said. He noted that “among the thousands of owners of the blocked sites,” only a “very few” spoke out in public against the blacklisting. There was only one court appeal, he boasted, adding that public opinion polls showed that 82 percent of those questioned in Russia supported the law that permitted the blacklisting.¹⁰

Zharov and Ksenzov had found a way to put pressure on the Internet companies, and the companies did not fight back. The Internet providers’ silence, first seen in Levenchuk’s experience with SORM years earlier, repeated itself. Back then the issue had been the black boxes. This time the companies did not protest government censorship.

An army of volunteers boosted the agency. Since 2012 a group calling itself Cyberguards of the Safe Internet League were patrolling the Internet, hunting down the sites with “prohibited information.” The League was launched by a group of Orthodox businessmen to promote Internet censorship under the pretext of protecting children from harmful content, with the blessing of Shchegolev, the minister of communications and media.¹¹ In 2014 the leader of the League proudly reported that they processed 37,400 complaints.¹² But that was not enough, and the Russian authorities appealed to pro-Kremlin youth organizations for help with Internet censoring, echoing the tactics used with patriotic-hackers and trolls. In February 2013 Molodaya Gvardiya, or Youth Guard, the youth wing of Putin’s United Russia party, launched a special unit called Media Gvardiya, or Media

Guard.¹³ In March 2015 this volunteer army consisted of 3,699 members who worked to identify sites with prohibited content. Due to their efforts, 2,475 pages were taken down. The site organized a competition among the members to see who could find the most sites to report to Roskomnadzor. The main goal of this effort was not to protect children but to hunt down the sites with “extremist content,” including any content unpleasant to the Kremlin.

As Putin turned the screws into Internet freedom, an event occurred in Russia he could not have predicted.

On June 23, 2013, Edward Snowden flew into Moscow’s Sheremetyevo Airport. Snowden, a former contractor for the US National Security Agency, or NSA, who had once worked in information technology for the CIA, had at this point exposed the bulk of telephone and Internet metadata of millions of Americans and people around the world, obtained by the NSA. Snowden said he leaked documents about the surveillance because the US government had obtained capabilities “without any warrant to search for, seize, and read your communications. Anyone’s communications at any time. That is the power to change people’s fates.”¹⁴

Snowden’s revelations had a huge impact. Today the Internet is ubiquitous, connecting everything from dating to purchases to the exchange of the most sensitive and personal information. Many people have questioned whether there is such a thing as privacy anymore. Human rights organizations around the world supported Snowden as a way to push back against the surveillance state, to reclaim some privacy, and to allow information to flow freely without the threat of being monitored by the state. Snowden’s revelations touched off a campaign around the globe to reexamine the issues of digital freedoms and surveillance.

But just as he made the disclosures, Snowden landed in a country with a long tradition of secrecy and suppressing freedom of speech, a landscape roiled by the secret control and surveillance he claimed to despise.

At first Snowden was stuck in the airport terminal because his passport had

already been revoked by the United States and he did not have valid documents. He was supposed to be in a special transit zone, but no one could find him. What at first looked like a bad joke turned into long, dreadful weeks as Russian and international journalists scoured the airport looking for him. The journalists bought plane tickets in order to be admitted to secure areas, and some even flew to Cuba on a plane Snowden was rumored to be taking—he was not on the flight. It became obvious to the journalists that Snowden was well protected. Unlike other Moscow airports, Sheremetyevo had a special FSB detachment, established there in Soviet times when it was the only international airport in the country, as well as a normal section made up of the border guards. Snowden spent thirty-nine days, invisible, supposedly somewhere in the Sheremetyevo Airport.

On June 25, at a meeting with the president of Finland, Putin insisted that “our special services never worked with Mr. Snowden and are not working with him now.” He called Snowden a “transit passenger” who “remains in the transit hall.” Putin ruled out extraditing Snowden to the United States, where he was charged with leaking classified information, and declared that Snowden “has committed no crimes in the Russian Federation.”¹⁵ A week later Putin insisted, “Snowden is not our agent, never was, and isn’t today.”¹⁶ Putin seemed in these early weeks to be attempting to keep his distance from Snowden, saying he was a free man, comparing him to dissidents and human rights activists. Putin said Snowden could leave Russia if he wanted to. But was that the truth?

On July 11 Tanya Lokshina, the head of the Moscow office of Human Rights Watch, was at her office in Moscow, busy preparing for a business trip to New York. Although she appears to be a fragile woman with delicate features under a mop of fiery red hair, Lokshina was a fearless human rights activist who had carried out investigations of brutal abuses in Chechnya and Dagestan and during the Russian war with Georgia.

The Kremlin was never very pleased with her organization or Lokshina personally. She received menacing phone calls, and in October 2012 anonymous

threats were sent to her cell phone that included details that could have been obtained only by eavesdropping on her. At the time, she was six months pregnant. Kenneth Roth, the executive director of Human Rights Watch, declared that the people threatening her “knew where she lived, what she was doing. They made explicit reference to the fact of her pregnancy. They threatened harm to herself and to her unborn baby.”¹⁷

Lokshina had left Russia for a while, but now she was back in Moscow and focused on her work. Her son, Nikita, was six months old.

At 5 p.m. that day her assistant, Masha, opened the door and said, “Tanya, you have a phone call from Snowden.”¹⁸ Lokshina for a moment thought it had to be some sort of joke, but Masha insisted that a man on the phone said he is calling from Sheremetyevo, represents Snowden, and that Snowden wanted to meet her; the man on the phone was providing details of the meeting. Lokshina told Masha to give the caller her e-mail but still didn’t think it was really Snowden.

In five minutes she got an e-mail from ed.snowden@lavabit.com:

To: edsnowden@lavabit.com

From: edsnowden@lavabit.com

Date: 07/11/2013 04:12PM

Subject: Invitation to Edward Snowden statement TOMORROW 12 July 2013 @ 5:00PM Moscow Time

I have been extremely fortunate to enjoy and accept many offers of support and asylum from brave countries around the world. These nations have my gratitude, and I hope to travel to each of them to extend my personal thanks to their people and leaders. By refusing to compromise their principles in the face of intimidation, they have earned the respect of the world. Unfortunately, in recent weeks we have witnessed an unlawful campaign by officials in the U.S. Government to deny my right to seek and enjoy this asylum under

Article 14 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.¹⁹

The letter went on, inviting the human rights organizations and “other respected individuals” to join Snowden the next day at the airport, promising a discussion about “the next steps forward in my situation.” Lokshina was instructed to meet at Terminal F, in the “centre of the arrival hall,” and “someone from airport staff will be waiting there to receive you with a sign labeled ‘G9.’” Lokshina thought that “9” could mean the number of people invited. An identical e-mail arrived for Sergei Nikitin, director of Amnesty International’s office in Moscow.²⁰ Nikitin had directed Amnesty in Russia since 2003 and was also a target of the Russian authorities, who, a few months earlier, raided the organization’s office, a few small rooms hidden in an obscure courtyard in a derelict old building.²¹

Lokshina thought the e-mail looked strange. It was also very formal, addressed to no one. “I thought it was false. The letter was written in strange and awkward language.” She had spent years in the United States in her youth, and it looked to be written in British English: “in the *centre* of the arrival hall . . .” The telephone number was also unusual—a mobile number. Most Russian mobile numbers are registered to people, not organizations, so it was impossible, from the number, to discern anything about who was behind it. Lokshina forwarded the e-mail to her colleagues at the headquarters of Human Rights Watch as well as to a pair of friends, the Moscow correspondents of the *New York Times* and the *Daily Telegraph*. Nikitin had also sent it to his headquarters. Both were skeptical and uncertain.

Impulsively Lokshina then put the e-mail on her Facebook page. It made a huge and immediate splash in the media. The rest of the day and the next morning she felt under siege—the phone rang constantly, her son demanded her attention, and she still didn’t know whether to go to the airport. When she got another call from the same person who had first phoned and was now asked for passport details to get to the secure area, she realized the invitation was for real.

The next day Lokshina took with her a tape recorder she had been given by

Ellen Barry, a correspondent at the *New York Times*. When she and Nikitin arrived at Terminal F, they saw hundreds of journalists. She had plenty of experience with herds of reporters, but this one was larger than she had ever seen, like a “herd of mammoths that were going to trample me,” she recalled. The human rights activists who gathered around the sign “G9” were clearly divided into several parts: the Russian representatives of independent international human rights organizations, including Lokshina and Nikitin; heads of pro-Kremlin “human rights” groups, including Vladimir Lukin, Human Rights Commissioner of Russia, appointed by Putin, and Olga Kostina, a head of the government-funded NGO Resistance; a deputy of the State Duma, Vyacheslav Nikonov; and lastly, the well-known lawyers Anatoly Kucherena and Henri Reznik. Nikitin, with all his experience, immediately concluded that Kucherena, a tall, bulky, and imposing man, was the leader, if not an organizer of the meeting.

Kucherena is a prominent lawyer as well as a member of the Public Council within the FSB, an organization established in 2007 to promote the image of the Russian security service.²² Kucherena also serves as chairman of the Institute for Democracy and Cooperation, a front organization for Russia’s propaganda machine, with branches in New York and Paris. Putin had suggested personally that such an institute be created to criticize human rights violations in the United States; the institute has an annual report called “The State of Human Rights in the United States.”²³

Lokshina, Nikitin, and the other human rights activists were shown into a room in the secure area of the terminal and eventually led onto the airfield. At this moment Lokshina suddenly remembered that Snowden wanted to fly to Venezuela, and she thought maybe the plan was to fly Snowden there and to take the human rights activists along to guarantee his safety. She panicked and called her husband with instructions for how to feed the baby if she were flown to Venezuela. Then everyone was put on a bus.

The bus made a circle and stopped near an unmarked door of the same terminal, but on the far side of the building. They were shown into a room. When they walked in, Snowden was sitting there, along with a translator and Sarah Harrison, a member of the WikiLeaks group, who had been with Snowden since

he fled Hong Kong. Nikitin quickly approached Snowden and asked about his condition. He got to Snowden first because Kucherena doesn't speak English, and Nikitin seized the initiative. But then a man stood in front of them and made an announcement: "Dear gentlemen, Mr. Snowden wants to make a statement, and I ask you in the interests of his security do not record it on video." Nikitin, Kucherena, Lokshina, and Reznik sat in the first row. In the back were some young bulky men in suits. Lokshina took two photographs and sent them to Barry of the *Times* immediately. Barry at once published them on Twitter. Lokshina also put Barry's tape recorder on the table in front of her and turned it on. During the meeting Lokshina texted reports to Barry while Nikitin used an open line on his phone to transmit the audio to some journalists who were listening.

Lokshina told us later that she was certain it was not Edward Snowden who invited them. Snowden did not speak Russian and did not know the people there. Lokshina concluded it was all a show, orchestrated by the security services. "It was obvious that the comrades from the intelligence agencies gathered a group of people and made up all of this event. And they arranged the meeting, probably to legitimize the decision already made that he would be granted temporary asylum."

Kucherena, his legs crossed, sitting in the front row, attempted to ask the first question. He spoke in Russian and said, "Well, how do they treat you here?" He was cut off by Harrison, who shot back, "Please wait. First Ed Snowden had a statement to read."

Snowden used the moment to appeal for "guarantees of safe passage from the relevant nations in securing my travel to Latin America" and announced that he would also seek asylum in Russia. "I will be submitting my request to Russia today, and hope it will be accepted favorably." The rest of the meeting seemed to unfold quickly, and Lukin asked Snowden whether he had any complaints. He said no, and then lawyers started debating Snowden's status.

Nikitin gave Snowden his business card but never heard from him again. Snowden was extremely cautious, but Nikitin didn't think it was worthwhile to arrange some kind of covert communications channel; he mostly wanted to establish Snowden's condition, read Snowden's body language, and detect signs of torture—to ask the questions any human rights activist would naturally ask.

Nikitin observed that Snowden was relaxed and comfortable. “I was impressed by his sangfroid. After all, he lost everything.” Lokshina had the same feeling, “He did not look depressed or anxious.”

The meeting participants were shown out of the room, back to the terminal, and Snowden disappeared with Harrison. Lokshina instantly remembered that she forgot her tape recorder and asked the security men to retrieve it. In thirty minutes they brought Lokshina the tape recorder, but the recording had been erased; the meeting had lasted forty-five minutes. Lokshina and Nikitin told journalists in the terminal that they supported Snowden’s appeal for asylum. Kucherena, the lawyer with close connections to the FSB, said he would provide legal support for Snowden.

Did the Russian authorities stage a meeting so the human rights groups would endorse Snowden’s appeal for asylum, just as Putin wanted? Although they sat in the front row at the meeting, the human rights activists had no say over the meeting’s time, place, or circumstances. If there was a script, they had not written it. They heard Snowden talk, and then he disappeared. It was a clever manipulation. Snowden’s revelations about mass surveillance had outraged people around the world, and their anger was directed against the US government. Now Putin was presenting himself as a defender of freedoms and the only world leader strong enough to stand up to the United States. The human rights organizations, which Putin had been suppressing for years, were made props in Putin’s show, at least briefly. The meeting was a sign that Putin was not going to keep his distance from Snowden but rather would attempt to co-opt him for his own purposes.

A year later Lokshina, sitting in a coffee shop in Moscow, remarked that Snowden seems to have been trapped too. “In fact he’s in prison,” she said. “No doubt in a comfortable one—he is well fed there, and he did not need anything. But he does not walk the streets of this city.”

nowden may not have known or realized it, but his disclosures emboldened those

S in Russia who wanted more control over the Internet. The State Duma debated Snowden's revelations of mass surveillance in special hearings. Sergei Zheleznyak, a vice speaker of the Russian parliament, suggested that the Snowden disclosures meant Russian citizens should be forbidden from keeping their personal data on foreign servers. "We should provide a digital sovereignty for our country," he said. Ruslan Gattarov, chairman of one of the pro-Kremlin youth organizations and a member of the upper house of parliament, the Federation Council, invited Snowden to come to the Council to "investigate" what he described as the surrender of Russian citizens' data to the American intelligence agencies.²⁴

This "digital sovereignty" claim was cover for something the Kremlin wanted all along—to force Facebook, Twitter, and Google's services, Gmail and YouTube, to be subject to Russian legislation, which meant providing backdoor access to the Russian security services. It was a way to have SORM black boxes installed on the Gmail, Facebook, and Twitter servers. Since spring of 2011 the FSB had been lamenting it had no means to intercept chats and e-mail exchanges on Facebook and Gmail, and now the chances appeared to be improved. The pretext of protecting Russian personal data—the notion of "digital sovereignty"—was raised in order to impose new controls on the Internet, bring the global platforms to heel, and put their servers on the Russian soil. Snowden's name was being invoked by those who wanted to carry out new repressive measures in Russia.

On August 1, 2013, Snowden was granted one year of asylum in Russia, and the next day he left Sheremetyevo, still evading journalists. Kucherena reported the news, saying he personally put Snowden in the car. For months to come, Snowden refused to talk to Russian and Moscow-based foreign journalists. To us, the silence seemed odd and unpleasant. After all, Snowden wasn't afraid of journalists—he had used them to leak the thousands of pages of secret documents. He also spoke to American journalists coming from the United States. Snowden was, in theory, in favor of openness. So why did he refuse to talk to those of us in Russia who, in our journalism, fought every day for openness and freedom of information? Was he being manipulated again? And if so, by whom?

On September 4, 2013, Putin said in an interview that when Snowden first approached the Russian consulate in Hong Kong, the case was immediately reported to him, but he instructed aides to send Snowden away. That part of the story hadn't been reported before, but was it true? Was Putin really that ambivalent about this former NSA contractor who had upset the United States, or was he playing a clever game?²⁵

While Snowden remained out of sight, Russia's security services achieved another dramatic leap in their capability to eavesdrop on the Internet. In the autumn of 2013 new SORM technical guidelines were announced that would require phone operators and Internet providers to store information for twelve hours at a time until it could be retrieved by the authorities. The guidelines also made it possible for the security services to intercept correspondence that users send through services such as Gmail and Yahoo and the popular ICQ instant messages. The goal of the updated requirements was very clear: to expand surveillance capabilities to intercept messages and information passed through foreign Internet providers.

The reaction was surprising. On October 21 VimpelCom, one of Russia's largest telecom companies, publicly—and courageously—denounced the government's plans to expand the SORM capabilities. VimpelCom sent a letter to the Ministry of Communications, criticizing the plan as unconstitutional. Next another major provider, Mail.ru, said the requirement to keep data for twelve hours “violates the Constitution of the Russian Federation, in particular the right to privacy, confidentiality of correspondence, telephone conversations, postal, telegraph and other communications” and is “inconsistent with a number of federal laws and codes.”²⁶ The service also protested that a facility to keep that much data might not cost \$100 million, as VimpelCom suggested, but more like \$400 million. “This will require approximately 30–40 petabytes of data for the entire Runet every 12 hours,” said Vice President and Technical Director Vladimir Gabrielyan. Anton Nossik wrote that the “FSB wants to know about every one of our moves on

the Internet: Who and what we sent, and from whom they received, what sites come in, what we have there, name and password.”

Nossik also wrote that “fixing of all incoming and outgoing Internet traffic of 75 million Russian users requires, without any exaggeration, petabytes and exabytes of disk space.” He warned that the new SORM requirements would force users to pay more for Internet services. But the protests did not stop the Kremlin from doing what it wanted to do. The decree implementing the new SORM requirements was signed by the minister of communications on April 16, 2014, and required all operators to install the equipment by March 31, 2015. The requirement to keep twelve hours of data remained in the decree.²⁷ The Ministry of Communications officials also admitted that the new SORM black boxes are strengthened by DPI, as the devices can monitor the Internet traffic on the application level.²⁸ The two most intrusive surveillance technologies were finally combined, to be used by the Russian security services all over the country.

When all this was happening, Snowden was silent. Although he gave some interviews to American journalists, he refused to comment on Russian affairs and dropped off the radar until April 17, 2014. We tried repeatedly to contact Snowden, and we also asked American journalist, lawyer, and author Glenn Greenwald for an interview, but Greenwald never responded to our e-mails.

On that day Putin held another of his annual question-and-answer sessions in which citizens call in on a direct line. Much had changed since 2013; the success of the Sochi Olympics and the annexation of Crimea had generated a mood of intense patriotism and anti-Western sentiment. Putin’s approval ratings had soared.

As always, the call-in show was broadcast live by three major TV channels along with three radio stations, and it lasted nearly four hours. A well-staged event, it started with calls from Crimea, with “Thank you, Mr. President, on behalf of all the people of Crimea,” and other displays of boosterism. Hours passed, and all of a sudden a host in the studio in charge of fielding phone calls turned not to Putin but to the television watchers and proclaimed, “We have a surprise video call, which I would describe as sensational. It was sent by a person who has made an information revolution by exposing a mass surveillance program that affected millions of people around the world.”

Then, a theatrical pause.

“Mr. President, you have a question from former intelligence agent Edward Snowden!”

Putin grinned:

“Do I really?”

Then Snowden’s Skype call appeared on the screen. His first word was in Russian: “Zdravstvuyte”—Hello.

Then he proceeded in English:

I’d like to ask you a question about the mass surveillance of online communications and the bulk collection of private records by intelligence and law enforcement services. Recently, the United States, two independent White House investigations, as well as a federal court all concluded that these programs are ineffective in stopping terrorism. They also found that they unreasonably intrude into the private lives of ordinary citizens—individuals who have never been suspected of any wrongdoing or criminal activity; and that these kinds of programs are not the least intrusive means available to such agencies for these investigative purposes. Now, I’ve seen little public discussion of Russia’s own involvement in the policies of mass surveillance. So I’d like to ask you: Does Russia intercept, store, or analyze in any way the communications of millions of individuals, and do you believe that simply increasing the effectiveness of intelligence or law enforcement investigations can justify placing societies—rather than subjects—under surveillance? Thank you.²⁹

The host in the studio, journalist Kirill Kleymenov, asked Putin, “Mr. President, did you get the gist of the question?”

Putin, obviously pleased with the question, replied, “Yes, by and large.”

Nevertheless Kleymenov—after praising Putin’s ability to speak English (Putin laughed, saying American English is slightly different)—tried to translate the question. He almost missed the introductory part about the White House investigations and mistranslated the part about the debate in Russia over surveillance, saying there is a large debate in Russia, and then posed a question about mass surveillance.

Putin began his reply with a joke. “Mr. Snowden, you are a former

intelligence officer, and I,”—a pause, and the audience started to giggle —“worked for an intelligence agency too. So let’s talk like two professionals.” Putin then insisted that Russian laws strictly regulate the use of special equipment by the security services, including for the tapping of private conversations and for the surveillance of online communications. Putin emphasized that a court warrant is needed to use the equipment in each particular case. “So there is no, and cannot be any, indiscriminate mass surveillance under Russian law,” Putin declared.

“Yes, we do surveillance on the Internet,” Putin allowed, “but not on such a large scale and not arbitrarily. Besides,”—and here he smiled slyly—“we do not have such technical capabilities and funds as the United States.”³⁰

Putin’s answer was a classic obfuscation, just like the one he gave NTV journalists more than a decade earlier in the library of the Kremlin.

At first we were encouraged that Snowden at last started talking about Russia’s tightening surveillance of the Internet, hoping it could provoke a public debate about SORM—Andrei made this point in his public comments. But Snowden was heavily criticized for taking part in a Putin show, and the next day he published an op-ed in the *Guardian* answering his critics. “I was surprised that people who witnessed me risk my life to expose the surveillance practices of my own country could not believe that I might also criticize the surveillance policies of Russia, a country to which I have sworn no allegiance, without ulterior motive,” he wrote. “I regret that my question could be misinterpreted, and that it enabled many to ignore the substance of the question—and Putin’s evasive response—in order to speculate, wildly and incorrectly, about my motives for asking it.”

Snowden added, “The investigative journalist Andrei Soldatov, perhaps the single most prominent critic of Russia’s surveillance apparatus (and someone who has repeatedly criticized me in the past year), described my question as ‘extremely important for Russia.’ According to the *Daily Beast*, Soldatov said it could lift a de facto ban on public conversations about state eavesdropping. Others have pointed out that Putin’s response appears to be the strongest denial of involvement in mass surveillance ever given by a Russian leader—a denial that is, generously speaking, likely to be revisited by journalists.”³¹

In the end Snowden's question didn't provoke a debate in Russia over surveillance. Nor did it stop the Kremlin.

On May 5 Putin signed a new law aimed at tightening the controls over the many popular online bloggers in Russia who carried out lively and relatively free debates on the Internet. Widely known as the "Bloggers Law," it was a part of a broader rewrite of Russia's antiterrorism statute, started in January 2014, which expanded the already-vast clout of the country's Federal Security Service and altered penalties for terrorism and extremism crimes. The new law required bloggers with more than three thousand followers—which was many of them—to register with the government. Registration was more than a mere formality; it would give the security services a way to track them, intimidate them, or close them down. Once registered like the news media, a blogger would be subject to state regulation. In addition to the registration, the law required that bloggers could not remain anonymous and that social media would maintain computer records on Russian soil of everything posted over the previous six months. The law marked a first legislative step to force the global social media to relocate their servers to Russia. At their headquarters in California, both Twitter and Facebook said they were studying the law but would not comment further.

Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 presaged still more efforts to control the Internet. Ksenzov, the chief censor at Roskomnadzor, became more and more aggressive on Twitter against the demonstrators in Ukraine, whose Maidan uprising, named after the square in Kiev, had touched off the crisis. The Maidan demonstrations frightened Putin too.

Ksenzov lashed out at the US, Russian, and international media in a string of angry tweets. In one of them he accused CNN of being "insane" for quoting Zbigniew Brzezinski, the former White House national security advisor. Then, on May 16, he attacked Twitter itself, and this time it was much more serious. In an interview with *Izvestia*, the largest pro-Kremlin daily newspaper, Ksenzov claimed that Twitter promotes the interests of the United States and then added, "We can tomorrow block Twitter or Facebook in Russia. It will take few minutes. We do not see this as a big risk. If at any point we decide that the impact of disabling of social networks will be less significant compared to the harm caused

by the unconstructive position of management of international companies for Russian society, we will do what is required to do by law.” The threat was the most categorical yet made in public. Medvedev, serving as prime minister, criticized Ksenzov, and Roskomnadzor did not officially enforce Ksenzov’s statement. But he was unrepentant. The same day on Twitter he said, “Not going to make excuses. Responsible for my words.”

Twitter got the message. A few days later it blocked accounts of the radical Ukrainian party Pravy Sector for Russian users, saying the action was in response to a Russian court order. The action marked another success for the Kremlin’s effort to tame the global Internet giants, but the Electronic Frontier Foundation in the United States took note and made a good point about Twitter’s decision: “There are two ways that Twitter’s actions are disappointing. First, Twitter has no employees or assets in Russia, so it should not have to comply with a Russian court order at all. And the order isn’t even about a Russian account—it’s a Ukrainian one. Worse yet, Pravy Sector’s account is plainly political. If Twitter won’t stand up for political speech in a country where independent media is increasingly under attack, what *will* it stand for?”

On July 4 the State Duma passed another law prohibiting the storage of Russians’ personal data anywhere but in Russia. Once again members of parliament pointed to Snowden’s revelations of mass surveillance to justify the action. A member of Putin’s United Russia party suggested nominating Snowden for a Nobel Prize. In effect, Russian security agencies received expanded powers over the Internet under the pretext of protecting the personal data of Russian citizens from the menace that Snowden had described.

The law stipulated that global platforms would relocate their servers to Russia by September 1, 2015. After this, all three global platforms—Google, Twitter, and Facebook—sent high-ranking representatives to Moscow. Details of their talks were kept secret. On July 28 Ksenzov, who had turned Twitter into his main channel of communication, tweeted, “They start a war against us. A full-scale Third World Information one.” On August 5 he triumphantly retweeted news from the state-controlled RIA Novosti agency: “For the first time, Apple has begun to store personal user data on the Chinese soil.”

The pressure on the global platforms became enormous. Of the trio, only Google had an office in Moscow. Very secretive and shielded from journalists by a hired public relations company, Google's government relations officer was Marina Zhunich. She had started her career at the Moscow office of the BBC's Russian service and then briefly joined the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. Hers was a classic career for a graduate of the Moscow State Institute of International Relations, which groomed young people for service in diplomacy. In the 2000s she worked in public relations at international companies in Moscow. She joined Google in 2009, when Medvedev was president and the Internet was his most enjoyable toy. In the summer of 2012 Zhunich found herself in the eye of the storm. In July she made a statement on YouTube criticizing the proposals to block sites by their Internet protocol or IP addresses.³² Then she attended most of the meetings at the Ministry of Communications, and some progovernment Internet businessmen openly expressed unhappiness with her active involvement in Russian policy.

Two years later, in June 2014, it was revealed that Zhunich had herself been put under surveillance by private security services hired by businessmen close to the Kremlin—she had been spied on along with journalists of TV Dozhd and *Novaya Gazeta*. When the surveillance was made public by the hacker group Anonymous, Google was silent. We tried to talk to Zhunich at a conference, but she slipped away. We then turned to Facebook to connect with her, and for two days attempted to coax her into an interview. She was very guarded, and when we asked about surveillance of her, she replied, “No, I will not take part in that.”³³

On November 14, 2014, just after 7:00 p.m. and already dark, dozens of people, mostly in their twenties and thirties, were searching for a small red-brick building in Moscow. It was not easy, as the tiny structure was in the yard of a derelict factory, with no signs to help the visitors find it. The visitors, most of them journalists working for Russian online news media, seemed to be lost, searching for the modest venue for a ceremony of the national Internet media

awards named after Edward Snowden.

The Russian Association for Electronic Communications had announced in April the establishment of the new award and claimed they had secured agreement from Snowden. But many of the journalists knew it was Alexey Venediktov who was behind the idea. Venediktov positioned himself as a quiet intermediary between the digital news and social media and his own high-placed contacts in the Kremlin. His personal assistant had secured the agreement of Snowden for the award. The assistant was also inserted by Venediktov into a team of experts to work on the controversial Bloggers Law. Venediktov was an editor-in-chief of Echo Moskvy, the radio station that had been a champion of liberal democracy since the last days of the Soviet Union, but he also maintained good contacts in the Kremlin, including, periodically, Putin himself.

On the cold day in November chosen to award the prizes, the mood was cheerless. Once they found the building, the journalists encountered a band that tried to raise their spirits, to no avail. Two of the show's hosts, Tatyana Felgenhauer and Alexander Plushev, both of them journalists from Echo Moskvy, wore long faces—the fate of the station was increasingly in doubt, in part because of some indiscreet tweets by Plushev that drew the ire of Putin's team. The chairman of the board of directors of the station, Mikhail Lesin, who had tried to lay his hands on the Internet in December 1999 at the meeting with Putin, warned that that it's "entirely possible" to fire Venediktov. Everyone at Echo was on edge.

Plushev and Felgenhauer tried their best while giving the awards, making some jokes, but when Plushev read a gag about his possible firing, he laughed bitterly. The show itself was sad and confused. Ilya Klishin, now the editor of TV Dozhd's website, was clearly shocked when he got his award, shared with an editor of the website of Lifenews.ru, a shameless pro-Kremlin tabloid-style TV channel that was preparing to take up occupancy of TV Dozhd's premises after TV Dozhd had been expelled from the Red October complex.

One of those in the crowd was Stas Kozlovsky, leader of the Wikipedia community in Russia and a professor in the psychology department at Moscow State University. Kozlovsky, thirty-eight, discovered Wikipedia in 2003, when its Russian version had only a few hundred articles. He gave up his blog and started

to write for Wikipedia. Though he looked a bit like a Cheshire cat, Kozlovsky was famous for being a fierce fighter for Internet freedom. He was the one who, at Irina Levova's urging, put Russian Wikipedia into a blackout in the summer of 2012 to protest Internet filtering and has been battling on behalf of Wikipedia since the authorities first tried to block the online encyclopedia.

Artem Kozlyuk, a head of Rublacklist.net, the watchdog that keeps tabs on which sites have been blacklisted, greeted him with a knowing smile: "Hi, Stas, are you ready for a blackout in May?" In May 2015 a new law was to come into force that would make it possible to block all kinds of sites if they carried information without signed agreements from authors or rights holders, a measure described as an antipiracy law. It would almost certainly lead to blocking Wikipedia. "Now any hyperlink to any text or page on the Internet can cause blocking of a website. The Russian Wikipedia contains nearly 1.2 million articles, and each has dozens of hyperlinks to the sources," Kozlovsky told us.

At the Snowden ceremony there was no sign of the man who had loaned it his name. When Andrei pointed that out to Kozlovsky, he replied with a sad smile, "Well, Snowden could have done good things globally, but for Russia he was a disaster."

Four months later, in March 2015, the Ministry of Communications convened a gathering of the biggest Russian data centers to discuss the relocation of servers. A representative of Rostelecom, a state-controlled Russian operator, stepped in to announce that Google had already relocated the servers to the operator's data center, adding, "The Company [Google] is our client now, and we are the restricted access, semi-government facility."³⁴ At the time Google declined to provide comments.

Snowden, a whistleblower who loved to quote the UN Declaration of Human Rights, landed in a country with a miserable record on human rights. He appealed to NGOs and investigative journalists for help, but in Russia human rights activists are branded "foreign agents" or spies, and investigative journalism

is under threat of complete extinction. Snowden argued that he took risks to expose state secrets in the interests of freedom of information, but he remained a guest of a regime that for years has been suppressing freedom of information. Although he justified his actions by the need to defend the Internet from government intrusion, when he landed in Moscow, the Kremlin was in the middle of a large-scale offensive against Internet freedoms.

Snowden failed to respond to these challenges. For months he tried to pretend he was not in Russia, but just somewhere, in some limbo, that he found asylum in an unmarked country that would never extradite him to the United States. The Kremlin helped him preserve this fiction, and he was never dragged into being a tool of the Russian propaganda media outlets. He was allowed to keep out of sight.

After ten months in Moscow, Snowden asked Putin at a staged news conference about surveillance, but Putin merely deflected the question.

Since the day Snowden landed in Moscow the symbols of the global Internet—Google, Facebook, and Twitter—came under increasing pressure from the Kremlin to make the global Internet local, to destroy the very nature of the global network. Snowden didn't say a word about it except for his single call to the Putin news conference.

Snowden's revelations suggest he aspired to fight for Internet freedom not only in the United States but around the world; however, Russia was omitted from his fight. He left his home country to campaign for more transparency surrounding the intelligence agencies' activities, and found himself living in Moscow, heavily protected by Russian secret services—behind the walls, shielded from the world outside.

At the same time Snowden was in Moscow, Russia was already attempting to change the global rules of the Internet. That too seemed to escape Snowden's attention.