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'Russia's only choice is to permit Snowden to live here' - Putin

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Vladimir Putin (R) in Novo-Ogaryovo during an interview to Channel One and The Associated Press (RIA Novosti / Alexei Druzhinin)

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Ahead of the G20 summit in St. Petersburg, Russian President Vladimir Putin sat down for an interview with AP and Channel 1. Among many issues, the leader spoke about Snowden, Syria, and Russia's controversial gay propaganda law.

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But mistakes may occur. For instance, in the US they inflict the death penalty. All the countries that practice the death penalty have seen cases when an innocent person was sentenced to death, which was discovered after the penalty had been carried out – and Russia is no exception. So what can I say here? That we should abolish all the courts? No, we have to improve the judicial system and legal framework making it more transparent, up-to-date and proportionate to the given type of social relations this or that law regulates. So it's about working on the judicial system, and it doesn't mean it is no good at all and we should wreck it. It isn't true. Russia's judicial system is deep-rooted and is part and parcel of the international judicial system. Russian law has a long history, it is part of European continental law and a lot of its principles as well as legal precedents are on a par with the legislation and case law of other countries, and sometimes even better. Yes, there are a lot of problems and we have to work them out.

C1: *Would you say that the Russian justice system is independent?*

VP: Yes, the justice system in Russia is independent. If a judge doesn't want to be independent, then of course there can be no talk of independence – he would go to the governor or to someone else to ask for advice. But I assure you, this happens pretty much everywhere. Generally, if a judge takes a principled stand, no one can do anything about it. In present conditions in modern Russia, I believe nobody would even want to try to do so, considering the significant legal and procedural power a judge wields.

All eyes on Snowden

AP: *Since we're talking about legal matters, the Edward Snowden case has sparked a lot of unhappiness and frustration. What do you, as a former security officer, think about the actions of a man like Snowden, who leaked secret information he was entrusted with?*

VP: If it was truly secret information that caused us harm in any way, I would make sure he is prosecuted and adequately punished in accordance with the Russian laws.

AP: *In that regard, do you think the US administration is right to seek his return from Russia and ask you to send him back?*

VP: It's a possibility. But you see, this is not the case. The problem is that we don't know whether or not the Administration is right. And the problem is not that we are protecting Edward Snowden. We are not. The problem

is that there is no extradition treaty between the US and Russia. We have proposed to sign such a treaty on numerous occasions, but the US refused.



Edward Snowden (AFP Photo / The Guardian)

There are certain international rules and procedures regarding extradition of criminals, that is, there has to be an agreement which outlines many things and gives certain guarantees. But the US refused to sign such an agreement with Russia. And the American side doesn't extradite our criminals, who committed much worse crimes than leaking secrets. Their hands are covered in blood, they killed and trafficked people, and our American counterparts know it and still they don't extradite them. We can't say for sure whether or not Mr. Snowden committed a crime in the US, it's impossible for us to ascertain. But as a sovereign country that has no extradition treaty with the US, Russia has no other choice but to permit him to live here.

I'm going to honestly tell you something I never said before – though I've hinted, but I haven't said it. Snowden first met with our diplomats while in Hong Kong. I was told about it, and that he was an intelligence agency employee. "What does he want?" I asked. The answer was that he fought for freedom of information, fought with illegal activities in the US and violations of international law. I said, "Tell him that if he wants to stay in Russia he has to stop any work that damages Russia-US relations. We're not an NGO, we have national interests and we have no intention of damaging Russian-American relations." And he said, "No, I'm a human rights activist, and I urge you to join my cause". I said, "No, we aren't joining his cause – if he wants to fight, let him fight on his own." So he just walked out, and that's it.

And then he began his flight to Latin America. I was told that Mr. Snowden was on a plane to Russia two hours before it landed. What happened next? There was a leak. I hope I don't offend the US security agencies and diplomats but they could have handled this issue in a more professional manner. Instead of allowing him to enter a country where it would be easy for them to operate, they intimidated everybody – Latin America, and European countries. Or they could've intercepted him along the way, like they did with the President of one of the Latin American countries, which, by the way, was absolutely unacceptable and unworthy of the US and its European allies. It's humiliating. With Snowden, however, it would have worked. Why didn't they do that? No, they chose to intimidate everybody, and as a result, naturally, he stayed at our airport and got stranded here in Russia. So what we were supposed to do now? Send him back? Then let's draw up an extradition treaty, and you'll give us our criminals. If you don't want to, fine. But why do you demand his extradition on a unilateral basis? Why this snobbery? We need to take each other's interests into account, work things out and make sound decisions.

So we're not protecting Snowden, we're defending the existing norms of bilateral relations. I very much hope that in the future Russia and the United States will reach agreement on this subject and make it a legally binding one.

AP: *Has Snowden offered Russia any confidential information?*

VP: No, he didn't offer anything; we never got anything from him, and we never wanted to. As professionals, we do realize that our American intelligence counterparts are well aware of anything he could ever tell us. They have already calculated all possible risks that could be a threat to them; they've replaced, destroyed or changed everything. What use could he be for us? We didn't even want to get involved in that matter in any way. He's a totally different kind of man, even though he could be portrayed in many possible ways. I do realize that the US secret service prefers to portray him as a traitor. But he has a different mentality. He believes he is a human rights campaigner. Of course, some people don't agree with this but after all it's a matter of opinion. But that's his stance, and that's his position in dealing with us. We don't want to involve him in any kind of collaboration. We don't want to fish any information out of him. He wasn't even trying to give us anything, and we weren't trying to fish for anything.

AP: *So theoretically he could live to an old age here in Russia?*

VP: You know, I do at times wonder about him. He is a strange guy. He's a young man in his 30s. I've no idea what he's thinking of. How is he going to carry on with his life? I think he's doomed himself for quite a difficult life. I cannot even imagine what he plans to do next. We're obviously not going to extradite him, so at least he can be safe here. But what then? Perhaps in a while the US might realize that he's not a traitor or a spy but rather a man of certain convictions which could be viewed in different ways. And perhaps some compromise could then be found. I don't know, it's his destiny, and his own choice. He believes it was an honorable and a justified thing to do. If he thinks he should make this sacrifice, it is up to him.

Russian economy

C1: *Mr. Putin, if you don't mind, I am going to ask a few questions about the economy. During your recent visit to Vladivostok, at a meeting with students, you mentioned that the government would have to cut down its budget spending. A little bit of an outdated term, the word 'sequestration' comes to mind here. Are the cuts going to be made this year or next year? And how significant are they going to be?*

VP: Let me remind you that sequestration is tough reduction of the entire budget by a certain figure without any exceptions and no matter what the priorities are. Sometimes this happens to certain economies and is due to some sharp economic fluctuations and negative tendencies. We are not in this kind of situation right now. We are not in the red – the economy shows small growth compared to the previous year. The thing is that we assumed the growth would be higher. And higher growth supposes greater budget revenues. Initially, we intended to spend more on different programs.

Now it's obvious that the forecast is a bit different. The economy is growing, but slowly. Revenues will be smaller, which means that we need much more careful spending. So it is not sequestration, but there is yet another economic development forecast to be made. Based on this prediction and realities, we will have to specify the priorities and map out our spending. I think we will have to cut something, but it is up to the government to make a proposal while managing the budget.

C1: *We don't know yet which budget items will be sequestered?*

VP: No. If we don't do that, we will follow in the footsteps of those countries that accumulate large deficits and government debt. If we do