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Russians signal openness to Venezuela's offer to shelter Snowden

By [Will Englund](#), [Juan Forero](#) and [Emilia Diaz](#), Updated: Saturday, July 6, 9:10 AM

MOSCOW — Venezuela's offer of asylum for NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden got a thumbs up from key members of the Russian parliament Saturday, even as the Kremlin and Foreign Ministry kept a studious silence.

"Sanctuary for Snowden in Venezuela would be the best decision," Alexei Pushkov, head of the foreign affairs committee of Russia's lower house of parliament, wrote in a tweet Saturday.

Pushkov, who reliably reflects the government's position on international issues, voiced what appears to be a growing official desire to see Snowden leave after 13 days [holed up in transit limbo](#) at Moscow's Sheremetyevo airport. He wrote of Snowden, "He can't live at Sheremetyevo."

Another parliamentary deputy and member of Pushkov's committee, Alexander Babakov, told the Russian News Service on Saturday that he thinks the [offer of asylum](#) Friday from Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro was Snowden's best recourse.

"Given that Snowden's U.S. passport was revoked and that he has no particular alternative, the proposal, especially coming from the mouth of the head of state, is sure to be accepted," he said.

Pushkov also argued that asylum would not cost Venezuela, because the country is already in an acute conflict with the United States. "It can't get worse," he wrote.

The central question, though, is how Snowden might get to Venezuela. Until now, Russia has been saying he cannot fly out without proper documents, following the revocation of his U.S. passport. On Saturday, a lieutenant colonel in the FSB reserve, Anatoly Yermolin, told the radio station Ekho Moskvyy that Russia could grant Snowden status as a "stateless person," and that would allow him to leave without further complications.

But a more difficult question is: by what route? Direct commercial flights from Moscow to Havana cross European airspace, and after the [refusal of France, Italy and Spain to allow an overflight](#) Tuesday by Bolivian President Evo Morales, that route would seem to be problematic for Snowden. He might have to rely on a



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private plane, following a roundabout course, if he were to reach Caracas.

Saturday's 2:05 p.m. Aeroflot flight for Havana departed apparently without Snowden aboard.

Speaking at a military parade in Caracas on Friday to commemorate Venezuela's 202nd anniversary of independence, Maduro said he was offering asylum so that the National Security Agency leaker could live "in the fatherland of Bolívar and Chávez free of imperial North American persecution." The president was referring to the 19th-century Latin American independence hero, Simón Bolívar, and Maduro's predecessor, Hugo Chávez, who ruled for 14 years until he died of cancer in March.

"I announce to the friendly governments of the world that we have decided to use international humanitarian rights to protect Snowden from the persecution that the world's most powerful empire has unleashed against a young person who has told the truth," Maduro said.

Venezuela is the first country to offer sanctuary to Snowden. The 30-year-old computer whiz has reportedly requested asylum from more than 20 countries — among them Ecuador and Bolivia, allies of Venezuela's — since he arrived in Moscow. On Saturday, Morales said that Bolivia "is willing to give asylum" to Snowden, CNN reported, citing a government statement.

Maduro's offer came just hours after WikiLeaks, the anti-secrecy organization that is helping Snowden, said the fugitive had applied to six more countries to escape American justice. WikiLeaks would not identify the countries "due to attempted U.S. interference," the group said in a Twitter message.

A 50-year-old former union activist with close ties to Cuba, Maduro has been working hard to burnish his anti-imperialist credentials since winning a disputed election April 14 to succeed Chávez. He has talked about elaborate plans he says were hatched in the United States to poison him and destabilize his government and has accused the United States of infecting Chávez with cancer.

Maduro also has lashed out at U.S. policy toward Venezuela's allies, from Cuba to Syria.

In his speech, he praised Snowden, asking, "Who violated international law?"

"Ask ourselves: Is it a young person who rebelled and said the truth about United States espionage toward the world, or a government like the one from the United States?"

In his speech Friday and in previous comments, Maduro has characterized Snowden as a hero who has opened the door to U.S. war plans. Maduro has not explained the reference, but on Friday, he added that the "United States has launched bombs and armed the terrorist opposition in Syria against the people of Syria and against the legitimate president, Bashar al-Assad."

"Who is the terrorist?" Maduro asked. "Who is the world criminal?"

Maduro's comments have played well in some countries in Latin America, where there is indignation about the way Morales's flight was handled Tuesday because of the belief that Snowden was hiding aboard.

Morales, Maduro and several other leaders said the United States was responsible, a claim American officials neither admitted nor denied.

The scrape led to an emergency meeting of the Unasur group of nations Tuesday in Bolivia in which Morales and the leaders of Venezuela, Argentina, Ecuador, Peru and Uruguay issued strongly worded statements against the United States and European countries accused of having blocked the flight path of Morales's plane.

On Friday, another country close to Venezuela and hostile to the Obama administration, Nicaragua, said it was willing to offer asylum to Snowden "if circumstances allow it," as President Daniel Ortega put it.

But Venezuela, which has ample oil-fueled coffers and a deep antipathy toward Washington, has been most forceful in praising Snowden's actions.

Indeed, on Tuesday in Moscow, where he was attending an energy conference, Maduro spoke frequently about Snowden, saying his revelations showed how "the imperialist elite of the United States want to control the world, that they spy on friends and foes, that they spy on the whole world."

While he was in Moscow, Maduro attended a ceremony renaming a street after Chávez. Igor Sechin, who as the head of the state-owned Russian oil giant Rosneft and one of the most powerful men in the Kremlin's inner circle had gone to Caracas as Putin's representative at Chávez's funeral, made an emotional appearance at the renaming.

Forero reported from Bogota, Colombia; Diaz reported from Caracas, Venezuela.

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