

While N.S.A. Leaker Stays in Hiding, Russian TV Builds a Pedestal for Him

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MOSCOW — While Edward J. Snowden has remained mysteriously hidden from sight during his visit to Russia this week, Russian television has been making him a hero.

On programs that were hastily arranged and broadcast on the two largest federal channels, he was compared to the dissident Andrei Sakharov, to Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, and to Max Otto von Stirlitz, a dashing fictional double agent from Soviet television. He was described as “the man who declared war on Big Brother and got stuck in the transit zone,” and as “a soldier in the information war, who fights, of course, on the side of Russia, or maybe the side of China.”

For as long as he remains here, one program’s host said, “the pulse of world history is beating here in Moscow.”

Since Mr. Snowden landed in Moscow on Sunday, the likelihood that he will remain in Russia has steadily crept up.

Though President Vladimir V. Putin said this week that “the sooner he chooses his final destination, the better for us and for him,” Mr. Snowden shows no sign of leaving.

The chance that Russia will turn him in has all but vanished, as evidenced by Thursday’s television programs, which were almost certainly produced under Kremlin orders and have a powerful effect on public opinion. Officials here have signaled an openness to granting him political asylum, and each passing day would seem to narrow Mr. Snowden’s options, giving the United States time to negotiate with Ecuador and Venezuela, other countries that may grant him asylum.

“I think the main thing for him right now is to guarantee his security,” said Igor Korotchenko, a former specialist in Russia’s top military command who now edits the magazine National Defense. “Already he cannot live his former life. The United States of America will look for him all over the world in order to punish him as an example to potential traitors and so that the political elite in Washington will be satisfied. They want his blood.”

“Whose protection does he want: Ecuador, Venezuela or Russia? It is hard to judge right now,” Mr. Korotchenko said. He added, “In Russia, he will find a country capable of

guaranteeing his security because I think in Latin America the United States would find much opportunity to solve the problem, so to say.”

So far, there is no consensus among Russian elites on whether Russia should grant Mr. Snowden asylum, a step that would advertise the country, cold-war-style, as a haven for Western dissidents. Russia’s upper house of Parliament has invited him to testify about the impact of spying by the National Security Agency on Russian citizens, and about the activities of giant Internet companies that may have shared information with the agency.

Though Mr. Putin has made it a central goal to challenge American dominance in world affairs, the potential cost of granting Mr. Snowden asylum has come into sharper focus over the past few days. Russia will host President Obama in September, and would be stung if the visit were called off. Powerful figures like Igor I. Sechin, who as chairman of Rosneft has struck a series of bold deals with Western oil companies, may also be worried about the potential repercussions. Mr. Putin and many of those around him are former intelligence officers, and they may see Mr. Snowden as a traitor, and an unpredictable player.

Igor M. Bunin, the director of the Center for Political Technologies in Moscow, said that by far the best solution for Moscow would be to send Mr. Snowden to another country, “to Ecuador, Venezuela, to Cuba, wherever.”

“Snowden is like a hot meat pie in your hands: even if you want to eat it very much, it’s very hot and maybe it’s better to throw it on the floor,” Mr. Bunin said. “To make a deal with America to turn Snowden over would be a slap in the face of public opinion because he is already a hero in Russia and part of the West. On the other hand, not turning him over destroys your relationship with America.”

Unlike Ecuador and Venezuela, Russia has avoided staking out a position on political asylum for Mr. Snowden, and in [his remarks](#) at a news conference on Tuesday, Mr. Putin said he hoped not to become personally involved.

But on Wednesday the Kremlin apparently decided to hastily arrange two hourlong talk shows devoted to the case. Each focused less on Mr. Snowden himself than on the flaws of the United States and the threat posed by its intelligence apparatus. Aleksandr I. Shumilin, a political analyst who was invited to appear, said he had turned down the request, sensing that the result would be a “mighty propagandistic blow: not a shot from a pistol, but a shot from a cannon.”

One program featured a panel of legendary counterintelligence agents, including a man famous for meeting with Lee Harvey Oswald a few months before the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. Their discussion often turned to the subject of American spying on Russia. Mr. Korotchenko, one of the guests, made the case that most of the major American consulting firms in Moscow were actually “structural units of American intelligence,” including the National Security Agency.

“The N.S.A. is a global electronic vacuum cleaner, which monitors everything,” he said “Look at the top two floors of the new building of the U.S. Embassy — it’s a huge antenna, which listens to the Moscow air.”

Similar themes were sounded a few hours later on Channel 1, when the pro-Kremlin analyst Vyacheslav A. Nikonov warned that the United States, through its dominance over the Internet, could “strongly undermine the security of other states.”

“The Internet is an invention of the U.S. Ministry of Defense,” Mr. Nikonov said. “Where is the Internet? Physically, it is in the United States. What is the Internet? It’s an American nongovernmental organization which is, of course, connected with the intelligence services of the United States.”

Many speakers argued that Mr. Snowden’s case should neutralize, once and for all, Western criticism of Mr. Putin’s domestic policies. Convincing Russian citizens of this point is especially crucial now, when Russian courts have brought serious charges against several dozen Russians who led or took part in a wave of antigovernment protests.

Aleksandr Prokhanov, a nationalist ideologue who has emerged as a leader in conservative thought, called Mr. Snowden “a soldier of the information war,” stripping the United States of its right to criticize other countries.

“For Americans, human rights is a powerful tool for influencing other countries,” Mr. Prokhanov said. “A country ‘violates human rights,’ and its president becomes a devil incarnate, the society destabilizes, the human rights issue is followed by attack planes, and the country is wiped out from the face of the earth.”

Others speakers, like Veronika Krasheninnikova, urged Russians to rally around Mr. Snowden, noting the 60th anniversary this month of the execution of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg, who were convicted of conspiracy to commit espionage.

“I remind you that the death penalty still exists in the United States, so it’s not something impossible,” Ms. Krasheninnikova said. “One has to remember it.”

Nikolai V. Zlobin, a political analyst and writer who often appears on Russian television to articulate an American perspective and was invited to appear on both shows, said he believed Russian leaders were weighing the cost and benefit of different outcomes to Mr. Snowden’s case. In the end, he said, they can secure a propaganda coup without the participation of Mr. Snowden himself, and without granting him political amnesty.

“What happens now doesn’t matter because public opinion in Russia has already been shaped. America is lying, dishonest, and has double standards,” Mr. Zlobin said. “It’s a Christmas gift. They are trying to find the most deft way to use it, but it is unexpected, and they don’t know how to handle it.”

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