

Asylum in Russia for Snowden: more gains than losses for the Kremlin

Witold Rodkiewicz, Rosyjski azyl dla Snowdena – więcej korzyści niż strat

On 1 August, the Russian government granted temporary asylum (for one year) to Edward Snowden, a former contractor for the US National Security Agency, who has been hiding from US justice since revealing in June secret documents to the Western press about Internet surveillance by US intelligence. Since 23 June, Snowden has been staying in the transit zone of Moscow's Sheremetevo airport, and on 16 July he asked the government of the Russian Federation to grant him temporary asylum. Moscow's decision will not cause the Obama administration to abandon its 'reset' policy in relations with Russia. It will however, make implementation of that policy more difficult, since it will strengthen the position of its critics within the US establishment.

Commentary

- Both the decision to grant Mr. Snowden asylum, as well as the prior decision to permit him to fly to Moscow, were taken by the Russian authorities in the belief that Washington would not undertake any retaliatory measures. This is because the Russian elite perceives the United States as a declining power, in the terminal stage of its history, which is struggling with so many problems that it cannot afford further deterioration in its relations with Moscow. The Kremlin expected the Obama administration to pass over the Snowden case, and to continue its diplomatic efforts to gain Russian cooperation on reducing nuclear arsenals, finding a solution to the Syrian crisis, and dealing with the question of Iran's nuclear programme. The Kremlin assumed that President Obama would continue his policy of 'resetting' relations with Moscow. And although President Obama has cancelled the bilateral meeting with President Vladimir Putin which was to have been held in Moscow in early September immediately following the G-20 in St. Petersburg, this does not necessarily mean that the Obama administration will revise or toughen its policy towards Russia.
- Granting Snowden asylum brings Russia a number of image and propaganda benefits on the international stage. Russia can demonstrate its position as a great power by its effective opposition to American pressure. Moreover, it can pose as a defender of human rights, thus appealing to the sympathies of the liberal wing of international public opinion. Keeping Snowden within its effective power also gives the Russian authorities the

opportunity to use him as part of any bargaining with the United States.

- This decision has also brought the Kremlin dividends in domestic policy, because it has been welcomed by both conservative-nationalist (for its opposition to the United States) and liberal circles (for sheltering a defender of individual rights against surveillance by a great power's intelligence services).