

Putin Pregnant With Gossip

By [Victor Davidoff](#)

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The  Moscow Times

On Thursday, Fognews.ru, an obscure news portal, published a [report](#) that would ordinarily make headlines all over the world. "Lyudmila Putin Is Pregnant," Fognews.ru announced, citing an interview with Federation Council Speaker Valentina Matviyenko that she allegedly gave to the radio station Silver Rain.

According to Fognews.ru, Putin's wife is seven months pregnant and currently under observation at a hospital in Munich. The correspondent even called the hospital's director, who confirmed that "Frau Putin was under round-the-clock observation by specialists, and there is no reason to be concerned about the health of the mother-to-be, despite her age."

Not surprisingly, the news generated a lot of excitement on the Russian blogosphere. Feminist Maria Arbatova wrote on her [LiveJournal blog](#), "Way to go! I have a lot of respect for a woman who decides to have a child at that age." Lyudmila Putin is 54.

But the sensation died out within a day without even making it to the foreign news outlets.

The management of Silver Rain categorically denied that Matviyenko had said this, or that she had even given the radio station an interview in the first place.

This bit of disinformation would ordinarily be written off as an attempt by unprofessional journalists to get some attention. But on the same day, this "news" [appeared](#) on the The Moscow Post website, presented differently and without any reference to Silver Rain.

According to political analyst Vladimir Pribylovsky, The Moscow Post is one of the fiefdoms of the massive online empire run directly by the presidential administration. A quick glance at its headlines would seem to confirm this. The paper follows the party line and is largely devoted to negative information about a range of opposition leaders, from Gary Kasparov to Mikhail Gorbachev, whom the site accused of "selling out to the oligarchs."

It seems distinctly odd, if not crazy, for the pro-presidential media to disseminate dubious rumors about Putin's personal life. But as Shakespeare wrote: "Though this be madness, yet there is method in it."

The last time Lyudmila Putin appeared in public was on election day, March 4. Her noticeable absence during last week's Easter service immediately set off rumors that the Putins had some sort of family secret.

The rumors are a result of the almost total informational vacuum about Putin's personal life. Twelve years ago, Putin was more open. He gave an entire book's worth of information about his life and appeared in public with his wife and daughters. But then his life gradually became shrouded in a mist that engulfed people and information. First, his daughters disappeared from sight, and today no one has definite information on where they are or what they do. There are only rumors that one daughter is married to an oligarch, while the other was "married off" to the son of a South Korean diplomat.

Then Putin's wife began to appear in public more infrequently, and the rumor mill had a field day. Putin supporters maintain that she has entered a convent. Putin detractors say the first lady suffers from severe alcoholism.

Perhaps the Kremlin got tired of this endless, murky flow of rumors and decided to put an end to them. Of course, a spokesman could do this more honestly and easily, but that would break the leadership's trademark code of secrecy.

Putin has evolved to become increasingly secretive, going from a president elected through the democratic process in 2000 to a leader with nearly dictatorial powers today. A leader's personal openness is a good indicator of the political regime in the country. In democratic countries, the press and public know a great deal about their leader's personal life. But the lives of dictators are hidden from the public behind an impenetrable wall.

Lack of information about the dictator is usually replaced by praise from loyal subjects. For example, Stalin was almost officially given the impressive title of "genius of all times and all nations." But that pales before Deputy Prime Minister Vladislav Surkov's [recent statement](#) that Putin was "sent to Russia by destiny and God."

Of course, historical comparisons are often deceptive, but if recent political trends continue

unchanged, soon Belarussian President Alexander Lukashenko could lose his title of "Europe's last dictator." That title might go to another man who remains, after all these years, fundamentally unknown in his homeland and abroad.

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