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Putin's Crane Flight Hurt His Back, Report Says

By Nikolaus von Twickel

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The president bracing himself against a chair at a Vladivostok forum on Sept. 9, three days after the crane flight. **Jim Watson**

Fresh speculation that President Vladimir Putin has health problems was swirling Thursday, when a media report said the 60-year-old was suffering from an exacerbated back injury.

The injury flared up after the president's latest outdoor stunt when he flew a hang-glider with rare Siberian cranes, Vedomosti reported, citing two sources close to the Kremlin. After the Sept. 6 flight on the Arctic Yamal Peninsula, Putin flew to the Asia-Pacific summit in Vladivostok, where participants said he was limping.

Dubbed the "Flight of Hope," Putin's flight with the cranes was officially explained as an effort to attract attention to the endangered species. However, critics ridiculed the event as a publicity stunt.

Doctors have advised Putin not to fly due to concerns for his back, the report said, adding that the president was undergoing preventative treatment.

The Kremlin's webpage that tracks Putin's domestic and foreign travels has not been updated since early October, when he visited Ulyanovsk and Tajikistan.

Rumors that Putin was suffering from a back problem intensified last week, when it became known that he had postponed visits to Pakistan, Turkey and Turkmenistan. On Wednesday it emerged that the president's annual call-in show, in which he traditionally answers citizens' questions during a more than four-hour marathon, would be moved from December to next summer.

Adding to the flurry was the news that Putin would drive to the Kremlin as little as possible and do the majority of his work at his Novo-Ogaryovo residence west of Moscow.

On Thursday, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov took pains to play down the back pain reports. Speaking on Kommersant-FM radio, he merely said Putin had pulled a muscle, which he called "a normal sports injury." Peskov added that nothing had been exacerbated after the flight with the cranes and that the president's travel plans were often subject to change.

He also said that since there were no upcoming ceremonial functions in the Kremlin, Putin preferred to work in Novo-Ogaryovo "in order to cause no extra trouble" for Moscow's motorists. "He regularly — daily if possible — exercises as usual," Peskov said.

But a Cabinet source told The Moscow Times that Putin's back problem had been "widely talked about" in government circles since the president had been seen limping in Vladivostok.

"This is quite an unexpected development," the source told The Moscow Times, speaking on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the subject. He added that the situation already felt similar to the Yeltsin era. "It is reminiscent of 1996, when Yastrzhembsky took so many pains to depict the president as a healthy man," the source said.

Yeltsin's spokesman, Sergei Yastrzhembsky, consistently denied reports of Boris Yeltsin's failing health during the 1996 presidential election campaign. Yeltsin underwent heart surgery later that year. (See related story.)

Analysts have argued that Putin does not want reports about a health condition to hurt his image of a strongman close to nature, which he has cultivated over the years by regular photo and film ops ranging from horse-riding in Siberia and whale-watching in the Pacific.

Critics have said that like in Soviet times, the country can hardly afford an unhealthy president because Putin has built up a system of indispensability in which he alone makes all key decisions.

The problem was highlighted by the Vedomosti report, which said Bulgarian Prime Minister Boiko Borisov had threatened that his country would leave the South Stream pipeline project with Gazprom if Putin did not show up personally for the signing ceremony planned for Nov. 9.

The report also quoted undisclosed officials from the Commonwealth of Independent States

as saying the post-Soviet alliance had postponed a summit planned later this month after participating heads of states had indicated that they would not attend the event if Putin were replaced by Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev.

The Kremlin has said some of the postponed visits would take place in December. On Thursday, the Arctic Forum, an annual event that Putin has regularly attended in the past, was rescheduled for early December, indicating hopes that he will have recovered by then. The forum was suddenly postponed in mid-October with no explanation given.

Moscow Times reporter Roland Oliphant contributed to this report.

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