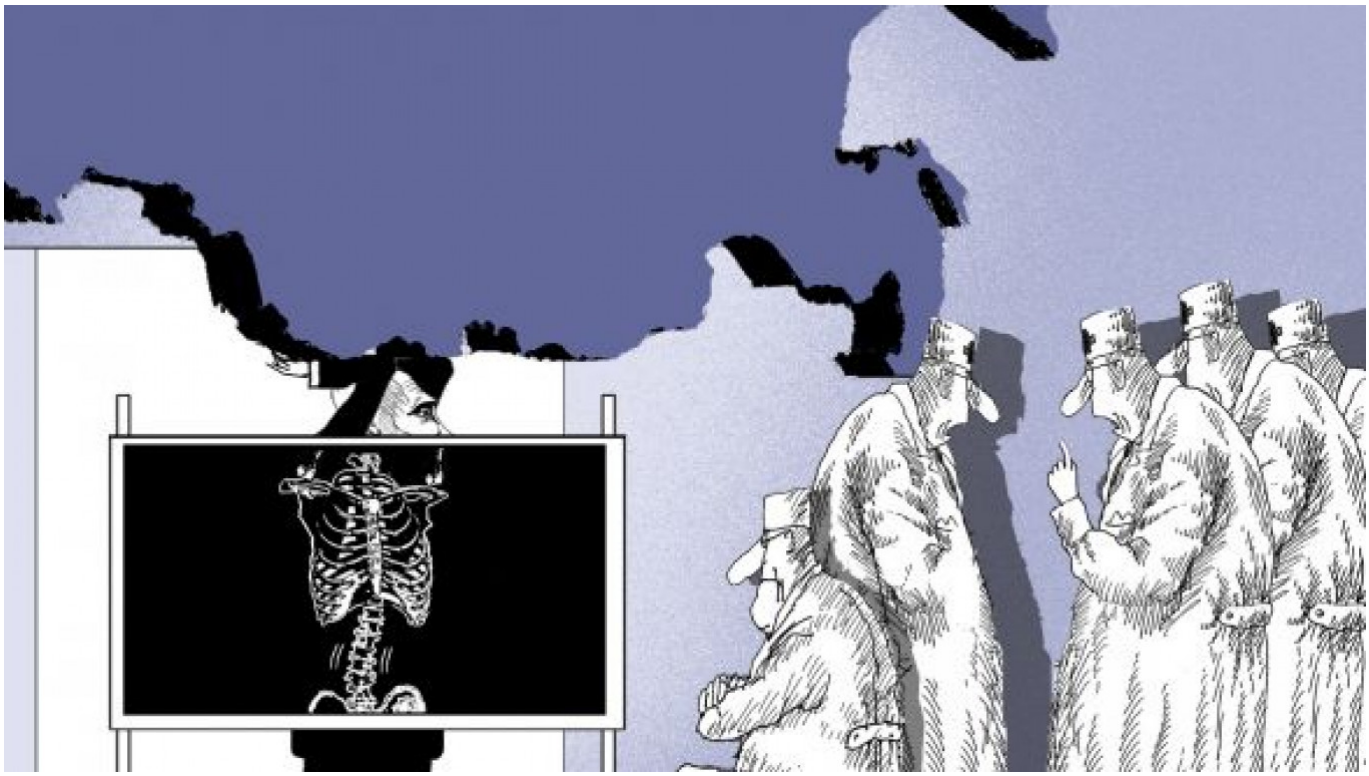
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Why It's So Hard to Get Off Putin's Back

By Victor Davidoff

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In democratic countries, the health problems of the leader are a cause for concern among his or her family, friends and sympathetic citizens. In authoritarian countries, the leader's health problems are a real threat to the state's stability. Knowing that, dictators try to cultivate an image of robust health. At age 73, Chinese leader Mao Tse Dung swam across the Yangtze River. Official portraits of Leonid Brezhnev and other old Soviet leaders only portrayed them at their peak of health and strength.

President Vladimir Putin's era of stability has often been compared to Brezhnev's era of stagnation, but the two figures could not be more different. Unlike the doddering Brezhnev, Putin has liked to show off his virility in various ways, such as bare-chested horseback riding, hockey, scuba diving and piloting aircraft. But at the September APEC summit in Vladivostok, the world suddenly saw a completely different Putin, limping and clearly grimacing in pain.

Soon observers noticed other oddities. Putin usually visits from two to four regions every month, but this fall he has spent almost all his time at his suburban residence outside Moscow, only going to St. Petersburg for his birthday.

A number of international visits were also canceled, including some important meetings like the CIS summit in Ashgabat, Turkmenistan, and visits to Turkey, India and Bulgaria, where an agreement on building the South Stream gas pipeline was to be signed.

Vedomosti sources said the visits were canceled at the insistence of doctors, who thought the flights would harm Putin's back. On Oct. 26, Reuters cited three anonymous sources in the Kremlin who said Putin is wearing a brace because of back pain and may even require an operation.

All this was immediately denied by Putin's spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, who explained away the trip cancellations as the result of logistical problems. As far as Putin's absence from the Kremlin was concerned, Peskov said, "There just aren't any ceremonial events in the schedule right now. ... As soon as there are, Putin will be back in the Kremlin."

But there was one "ceremonial event" — National Unity Day on Nov. 4, a holiday established by Putin himself to commemorate the day when the Polish garrison, which had occupied the Kremlin, capitulated to the Nizhny Novgorod volunteer army headed by Kuzma Minin and Dmitry Pozharsky in 1612. Last year both Putin and then-President Dmitry Medvedev attended celebrations in Nizhny Novgorod. This year, even though it was the 400th anniversary of the event, the holiday was barely marked. Journalist Andrei Malgin noted in his LiveJournal blog: "Until the last minute, it was planned that celebrations in Nizhny Novgorod would be the center of events. It was expected that Putin and Patriarch [Kirill] would be on the tribune. But on Nov. 4, the main Russian television channels didn't say a word about Nizhny Novgorod." Only the evening news had a modest two-minute video showing Putin laying wreaths before the statue of Minin and Pozharsky on Red Square.

After observing this, blogger Alexander Kozmin wrote on his Facebook page: "It looks like the rumors of Vladimir Putin's ill health are true. As he laid a wreath, the president took mincing steps and limped. And he wore a coat that was several sizes too large — probably to conceal an orthopedic brace."

The state of Putin's health instantly became the most-discussed topic on the Internet. Radio talk show host Yury Pronko wished Putin a quick recovery on his LiveJournal blog "I know from my own experience — every spring and fall — that back pain throws off your life, but it can be healed." Other commentators were less kind. An anonymous poster on the mr7.ru portal wrote, "Looks like the Mother of God heard Pussy Riot's prayer and decided to cast him out." The comments on that site were later closed.

Anastasia Udaltsova, a leftist activist and the wife of opposition leader Sergei Udaltsov, tweeted, "Rumors of Putin's ill health are being denied by the Kremlin, but the people of Russia are hoping for the best anyway." Another oppositional leader, Roman Dobrokhotov, joked on Twitter, "Putin just sneezed, and the country is already partying." And the page "In Memoriam: Putin 1952-2012" was closed by the social network after just four hours online.

Rumors of Putin's death may be exaggerated, but the real state of his health remains unknown, thanks to the Byzantine traditions of secrecy that the Kremlin has managed to maintain in the information age. But the Constitution clearly states what would happen if Putin were indeed seriously ill: Medvedev would become acting president and would have to call elections within three months. If Medvedev ran, he would undoubtedly return to the

Kremlin. No one in Putin's own clan has the public appeal to take his place.

What seems like a stable political system is actually incredibly unstable for the simple reason that it is based on one man who is as susceptible to illness and death as anyone else. The path of one of the world's great powers might suddenly change. But that, too, is part of the Byzantium tradition.

Victor Davidoff is a Moscow-based writer and journalist who follows the Russian blogosphere in his biweekly column.

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