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Japanese Premier Postpones Visit Due to Putin's Health, Reports Say

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Putin at a meeting Friday at his Novo-Ogoryovo residence with the heads of the State Duma party factions.

Talk about Vladimir Putin's health resurfaced Friday after Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda reportedly said he had postponed a visit to Moscow because Putin was feeling unwell.

"It's about [Putin's] health problem. This is not something that can be made public," Noda told officials on the northern island of Hokkaido about the delay of his trip, according to Reuters, which quoted Japanese news reports citing one of the officials.

Noda's visit was postponed from December to January, apparently because of scheduling difficulties, Japanese media reported earlier in November.

Following the reports Friday, Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov once again denied that Putin was ill.

"The president's health, I can repeat for the hundredth time, is absolutely normal, and he has a very, very overloaded work schedule," Peskov said on Kommersant FM radio, according to a transcript on the station's website.

Peskov added that no date had been fixed yet for Noda's visit. He explained the reports from Japan by arguing that "rumors" from the media had reached foreign leaders whose aides "then start to operate on the basis of these rumors."

Peskov also dismissed the fact that Putin has been seen mainly sitting at public events — such as during his Nov. 16 meeting with German Chancellor Angela Merkel in the Kremlin — by saying that such talks are usually held that way. "Can you imagine Putin occasionally jumping up in a conversation with Merkel?" he said.

Putin's chief foreign policy aide Yury Ushakov weighed in Friday as well, criticizing the Japanese reports as "unethical leaks."

Speaking to reporters, he confirmed that talks with Noda have been preliminarily scheduled for January. But, he said, "it is not customary to talk about this," Interfax reported.

Rumors have been swirling since media reports were published in late October that said Putin suffers from a back ailment and might need surgery. They were fueled by information that the Kremlin had cancelled or postponed presidential travels and public events in November, while Putin largely confined his work to his residence in the Novo-Ogaryovo suburb west of Moscow.

Earlier this week, the Kremlin confirmed that Putin will resume traveling. He is expected to visit Istanbul for talks with the Turkish government on Monday and to attend a summit of the Commonwealth of Independent States in Turkmenistan on Wednesday.

Peskov has consistently denied that Putin is suffering from a major health problem, saying merely that he pulled a muscle while exercising and that some travels had been postponed because of scheduling difficulties.

Belarussian President Alexander Lukashenko said earlier this week that Putin had injured his spine while practicing judo. "He lifted a guy, threw him and twisted his spine," Lukashenko told Reuters in an interview published Wednesday.

Asked about the Belarussian leader's comments, Peskov told Komsomolskaya Pravda in an interview published Friday that Putin took them philosophically. "[Lukashenko always] needs to chat about something," he was quoted as saying.

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