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Lavrov's Injuries Are Subject of Speculation

By Nikolaus von Twickel

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BRUSSELS — Speculation regarding the health of Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov lingered Wednesday, as news reports and the Foreign Ministry gave contradictory explanations for his bandaged arm and bruised face.

Lavrov arrived in Brussels on Tuesday for a NATO meeting with his left arm bandaged and his lips looking bruised.

Turkish media reported that Lavrov was rushed at 6 p.m. Monday to Taksim hospital in Istanbul, where the foreign minister had accompanied President Vladimir Putin for talks, after falling in his hotel. Doctors diagnosed a fractured wrist, Turkey's NTV news channel reported. http://www.ntvmsnbc.com/id/25403183

A visibly agitated Lavrov refused to discuss his health Tuesday in Brussels. Asked about it by a reporter, he angrily responded "Are you from a yellow newspaper?" before leaving

the briefing room.

Earlier in the day his spokesman Alexander Lukashevich had also refused to discuss the issue. Pressed by a Moscow Times reporter, he merely said that the injury does not affect the minister's work. "That is all there is to say," he said.

A Foreign Ministry representative told RIA-Novosti on Tuesday that Lavrov had suffered a "light sports injury."

"Information that the minister was taken to a hospital, where [his hand] was put in a cast, is absolutely thought up," the representative said.

In a strange twist, NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen apparently tripped and injured his shoulder in the same hotel while visiting Istanbul in April 2009, just after being nominated to the post of NATO secretary-general. He was treated for a dislocated shoulder in the same hospital as Lavrov, media reports said at the time.

Early on Wednesday, The Associated Press reported a different version of events, citing an unnamed friend of the foreign minister who said Lavrov had injured himself several days ago while playing soccer on the concrete surface of an ice hockey rink that had no ice.

But photos of Monday's talks in Istanbul show Lavrov sitting next to Putin with no cast or bandage on his hand.

U.S. State Department spokesman Mark Toner told journalists in Washington on Tuesday that Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was set to meet with Lavrov at an OSCE event in Dublin later this week to discuss Syria, among other issues, and that Lavrov's injury would not affect his ability to hold talks.

"I hope his arm feels better, but I have no doubt he's a pretty vital man — he'll soldier on," Toner said, according to a transcript of the press briefing posted on the State Department's website.

Meanwhile, Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov appeared increasingly frustrated by the regularity of media speculation about an alleged back injury the president has.

"I've had enough of explaining this. I do not see a reason to do this anymore," he told RIA-Novosti on Tuesday. "Those who refuse to accept the obvious do this only to continue various speculations."

News that Putin is suffering from back pain first surfaced in October, after the Kremlin canceled a host of foreign visits. Putin has largely confined his work to his suburban residence in Moscow since then.

His trip to Turkey on Monday was his first official travel in two months. On Wednesday he arrived in the Turkmen capital Ashgabat for a summit of the Commonwealth of Independent States.

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