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Rumors of Putin's Illness Run Rife in Russian Media

By Anna Dolgov

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Russian President Vladimir Putin attends a meeting with Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi at the Kremlin in Moscow, March 5, 2015.

Amid widespread speculation to the contrary, the Kremlin has moved to assure the public that President Vladimir Putin is "perfectly healthy."

Speculation about Putin's health flared on Wednesday when news broke that the president had postponed a planned visit to his Kazakh counterpart Nursultan Nazarbayev in Astana.

Announcing the development, Kazakh presidential spokesman Dauren Abayev declined to provide a reason for the delay. But an unidentified Kazakh government source said that "it looks like he [Putin] has fallen ill," Reuters reported.

The rumor mill quickly exploded, with media reports and Russian netizens alike comparing dates of Putin's recent meetings and deconstructing his schedule, highlighting the extent to

which Russia's political system depends on a single man.

The Kremlin promptly denied the rumor.

Presidential spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Wednesday that Putin was “perfectly healthy,” Rossia television reported. The Interfax news agency also quoted the spokesman as saying Putin felt “fine.”

He then made two tongue-in-cheek references to the presidency of Boris Yeltsin: firm handshakes and working with documents.

When asked by news station Ekho Moskvy if Putin's handshake remained firm, Peskov said it was strong enough to break hands.

He added that the president has been working “exhaustively” with documents.

Whenever Yeltsin — who served at Russia's helm through the bulk of the turbulent 1990s — fell ill, his spokesman would tell reporters that he was “working with documents,” but would add that the president's handshake remained “firm,” in a bid to reassure journalists of Yeltsin's enduring strength and capability.

Over time, these terms entered into the popular Russian lexicon.

In an apparent bid to provide evidence of the president's good health, the Kremlin published a photo on Wednesday of a meeting between Putin and the leader of the northern Karelia republic, but the publication — dated March 11 — appeared to have backfired when local media reported the meeting had taken place a week prior.

The meeting with Karelia's leader, Alexander Khudilainen, had initially been reported last week by Karelia's business news portal Vesti Karelii, which added in the March 5 article that the Kremlin might delay the release of a statement on the meeting for a few days. The report cited an unidentified official in Karelia's administration as saying that delays such as this were not unusual.

Following the release of the Kremlin statement on Wednesday, Karelia's Stolitsa na Onevo news site pointed out the discrepancy in dates, claiming via Twitter: “The meeting took place on March 4.”

Further fueling speculation, the signing of a cooperation deal between Russia and Georgia's breakaway state of South Ossetia, which had been planned for Wednesday, has also been postponed, Russia's Vzglyad business newspaper reported.

The signing has been pushed back for an “indefinite period,” the report said, calling the Kremlin decision “unexpected and nearly scandalous,” and one that has “caught everyone off guard.”

The head of the international affairs committee at South Ossetia's legislature, Dmitry Tasoyev, who took part in drafting the planned deal, said he had “no information” about the reasons for the change in plans, and Russia's Foreign Ministry declined to give immediate comment, Vzglyad reported.

Putin's most recent public appearance was a week ago, when he met with Italy's Prime Minister Matteo Renzi on March 5. The widely covered event was the first visit by a major European leader to Moscow since Russia annexed Crimea last spring.

Putin also met with a group of Russian mothers at the Kremlin in honor of International Women's Day. The presidential administration released a statement about the meeting on the day of the holiday, March 8, but RBC news agency reported that the actual gathering took place two days earlier.

Peskov's assertion that Putin is in good health, however, could also mean recent developments in Russian politics required Putin's presence in Moscow.

A heightening of the conflict in eastern Ukraine and the murder of opposition politician Boris Nemtsov, the investigation into whose death was reportedly accompanied by signs of an increased power struggle within the Russian administration, could have kept Putin busy behind closed doors.

Putin had been scheduled to meet with Federal Security Service officials on Thursday, but an unidentified official told RBC that the president was unlikely to attend the event.

However, a planned March 17 visit by the Russian president to a World War II museum was expected to go ahead as scheduled, an unidentified official said, RBC reported.

Staff Writer Ivan Nechepurenko contributed to this report.

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