

Has Putin gone missing while his lover gives birth? New Moscow claims amid 'coup' rumours

THE unfolding mystery of the whereabouts of Vladimir Putin has taken another bizarre twist today, after reports suggested the Russian president's 'girlfriend' was at an elite maternity hospital in Switzerland.

By Will Stewart

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Sources suggested 31-year-old Alina Kabayeva - who has been linked with the Russian leader - was close to giving birth in the Swiss city of Lugano.

But Moscow has dismissed the reports, insisting the Olympic gold medal-winner was not bearing Putin's child.

"Information about the birth of Vladimir Putin's child does not correspond to reality," a Kremlin spokesman said.

News of a possible birth in the Putin household follows strong hints that the president could be ousted in an audacious coup.

Rumours have swirled in recent days that the Russian president's days were numbered after a prolonged period of absence from the former spy-chief.

Putin hasn't been seen in public since last week after cancelling a scheduled trip to Kazakhstan, and now an insider has claimed the ex-KGB spy could be ejected from the Kremlin.

Current rumours in Moscow include Putin suffering a stroke, as well as an unfolding palace coup, fuelling suspicion Putin could be toppled after more than 11 years and two separate stints as leader.

But Russian state television today aired what it said was footage of Putin working at his residence outside Moscow, with a video showing the Russian leader sitting across a table from the head of the Supreme Court, Vyacheslav Lebedev.

Dressed in a grey suit and blue patterned tie, Reuters reporters said the president looked in no way different to other recent footage, despite claims he was suffering from ill-health.

Moscow sources suggest the Kremlin's chief of staff Sergei Ivanov - a former defence minister - will become prime minister in place of the lacklustre Dmitry Medvedev.

After this switch, dubbed a 'conspiracy of generals', Putin would be swiftly removed.

Under the Russian constitution, in the event of a president leaving office, the prime minister replaces him in an acting role, pending elections.

The latest forecast of an imminent sea change in Russian politics came from Andrei Illarionov, Putin's former chief economics aide, who last year predicted Putin's land grab against Ukraine three weeks before it happened.

The Kremlin insists Putin is healthy and in full control of his government, with his official spokesman saying the president's health was "really perfect".

Dmitry Peskov said the Russian leader was in such good shape that his handshake could "break your hand", adding: "everything is OK with him, and he's working in accordance with his traditionally overloaded working schedule.

“Actually it's very hard to explain this wave of interest toward the state of his health, we do appreciate the care, the global care.”

But Illarionov claimed: "In the next few days we should expect the resignation of prime minister Dmitry Medvedev, and Sergei Ivanov being appointed in his place."

After this, "the public is likely to be informed that the national leader (Putin) needs a well deserved rest".

Observers note that in recent days, Ivanov - who retained the military rank of colonel general and whose eldest son was killed in a mysterious drowning accident in Dubai last November - has been little seen in public.

And Medvedev, who served as president for four years to 2012, is also out of the limelight.

Some Kremlin-watchers say that Western sanctions have created huge tensions inside Putin's fractious entourage in recent weeks, with cash streams closed off.

The murder of opposition leader Boris Nemtsov - branded a "provocation" by Putin - has only intensified the infighting with blame for his slaying blamed on the president's close allies in Chechnya.

Illarionov, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute in Washington, earlier alleged a cover-up by the Russian authorities over Nemtsov's shooting yards from the Kremlin.

Putin is said by his spokesman Peskov to be "exhaustively" working on documents but has not been seen publicly since 5 March.

The Kremlin insists he is healthy, but this has done nothing to end speculation from Russians who for years were lied to over the health of geriatric Soviet leaders, and also Putin's predecessor Boris Yeltsin.

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

"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."

In December, Putin brushed aside claims he could be overthrown.

"I can assure you that we don't have palaces, so a palace coup isn't really possible. The official presidential residence is the Kremlin. It is well protected," he said.

Ivanov, at 62 the same age as Putin, was a career KGB spy who studied English in Ealing, west London during the Cold War.

He is wooden in his public appearances and lacks Putin's common touch with ordinary Russians.