

## **Vladimir Putin reappears on television as rumours ranging from him being under threat of a coup to the birth of his love child rock the Kremlin**

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Vladimir Putin has appeared on television for the first time in a week amid health fears and suggestions that he is being subject to a coup, while rumours persist that his 31-year-old 'girlfriend' is about to give birth.

Putin, 62, had cancelled several planned meetings during the week leading to speculation over his health and even claims that he was fighting to retain his position.

Channel NTV showed footage of Putin meeting with Supreme Court president Vyacheslav Lebedev, which it claims was shot on Friday.

According to Putin's staff, he was discussing judicial reform and the likely increase in the number of bankruptcies as a result of Russia's economic collapse.

Putin is due to meet with the president of Kyrgyzstan in St Petersburg on Monday according to the Kremlin.

The Russian president was last seen in public on March 5.

For the past week, the Russian government has been reluctantly answering questions about Putin's health and suggestions that his unofficial girlfriend Alina Kabayeva had checked into a Swiss maternity clinic.

Rumours about 31-year-old Alina Kabayeva surfaced with reports in Switzerland, Italy and Russia suggesting the gymnast had either given birth or was about to do so.

It comes amid increased speculation over what has happened to Putin with the Russian leader not having been seen for a week.

The claims focused on an elite clinic in Lugano, in the Italian region of the neutral country, with some accounts saying she had a new daughter.

Putin's spokesman - who has never confirmed a relationship between the 62 year old strongman and the Olympic gold-medal winner - insisted: 'Information about the birth of Vladimir Putin's child does not correspond to reality.'

The Russian embassy in Kiev refused to comment on a report on the speculation in newspaper Blick.

Russian Tatler yesterday repeated gossip that Kabayeva has two children already by Putin but adds there is no official confirmation.

Kabayeva has been largely out of sight since quitting as an MP in Putin's United Russia party last September, when she took over as head of a major media conglomerate.

Meanwhile, the Kremlin today issued a new picture showing Putin meeting the chairman of the Supreme Court Vyacheslav Lebedev at his out-of-Moscow residence Novo-Ogaryovo.

The image was meant to scotch suggestions that Putin was not at work amid speculation over a coup or illness.

However, there were immediate claims the picture and TV footage was old, and that it was further evidence of his mystery absence.

Current rumours in Moscow include Putin suffering a stroke, or an unfolding palace coup, following his sudden cancellation of a scheduled trip to Kazakhstan.

With Moscow in febrile mood, a former senior aide to the strongman claimed another ex-KGB spy is being urgently lined up to take over from him.

The theory suggests 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 - currently the subject of swirling rumours over his health after not being seen in public for more than a week - would be swiftly ousted.

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

This 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.

While the Kremlin insists Putin is healthy and in full control of his government, 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 Dmitry Peskov to be 'exhaustively' working on documents but has - most unusually - not been seen publicly since 5 March, more than a week.

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 who studied English in Ealing during the Cold War.

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