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## Can Putin's Absence Indicate A Palace Coup In Moscow?

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Recently media has been flooded with chatter surrounding Russian president Vladimir Putin's absence from the public eye over the past week, with rumors suggesting that there might have been a palace coup in the Kremlin, and even far-fetched hypothesis that Putin is dead, or at least has health problems.

Putin's spokesperson, Dmitry Peskov, dismissed the rumors that his boss is ill and insisted Putin is doing fine, but suspicions of a force-major situation in Moscow continue to circulate as no comforting evidence has been presented to the public to tamp down concerns. What if, indeed, something has happened to the Kremlin's political system, or its leader?

With life behind the Kremlin's walls anything but transparent, and a culture of secrecy surrounding everything – from Putin's personal life to the way his inner circle operates – it's impossible to tell anything for sure. Even when the Kremlin releases official information, it doesn't always mean it's true. The reported facts, so far, tell us that Putin has been out of public sight for about a week, he's missed several meetings (for example, the Federal Security Service meeting, which he usually attends) and he's cancelled his visit to Kazakhstan to see the presidents of Kazakhstan and Belarus.

Some reports suggest cracks in Putin's power vertical. Reuters reports that the killing of Russian opposition politician Boris Nemtsov and his alleged killers' link to Chechnya point to a possible divide between the Russian state security agency (FSB) – Putin's closest allies – and the head of Russia's Chechnya region, Ramzan Kadyrov, who has a pretty powerful army that operates outside of FSB's direct influence.

The idea of a palace coup, or at least some serious problems within Putin's power system, has been circulating in media for quite some time.

Last year, a theory about a confrontation between the “hawks” (war proponents, those in charge of the military and security agencies, living off of state money, moved by ideology and

geopolitical ambition) and the “doves” (Putin’s somewhat liberal cronies: oligarchs seeking success and power) gained popularity. It seemed to explain the confusing behavior of the Kremlin as it tried to save face over its hybrid war in eastern Ukraine while trying to maintain diplomatic relation with the rest of the world through lies and manipulation.

The hawks seem to have won. The new military doctrine was signed on December 26, stating that Russia faces threats from foreign nations and identifying the expansion of NATO as the biggest security threat. The Kremlin’s propaganda machine intensely militarized the mood of the Russian population and reinforced the idea of the West and Ukraine as Russia’s number one enemy.

The Russian state media often serves as a barometer for the direction the Kremlin intends to take the country. If one watches Russian federal channels for a while, it’s not that difficult to see how the people have been warmed to the idea that the West is a threat and already active against Russia from the Ukrainian side of the border. Thousands of Russians would rise up in a heartbeat to go to war to defend their fatherland, if the Kremlin gives the word.

As it turns out, the tension within Putin’s political system has become serious. Given the situation, and the strain of the ever-intensifying Cold War-type standoff between Russia and the West, it’s unlikely that the missing Russian leader is merely on a shirtless horseback riding expedition, taking some time off at a spa or getting another round of botox injections.

Andrey Illarionov, now a senior fellow at the Cato Institute in Washington D.C. and former economic policy advisor to Putin, suggests in his blog that the absent Putin indicates a palace coup. In the past, Illarionov had correctly forecast Putin’s military operation in Ukraine, although some of his predictions have not come to pass (yet), such as Russian attempts to claim power over Baltic States and Finland. Today, Illarionov suggests that Putin’s military and financial base may have come to a paralysis and that Putin’s chief of staff, Sergei Ivanov, will soon surface as a new leading public figure.

According to Putin’s spokesperson, Peskov, there is “No need to worry, everything is all right. He has work meetings all the time, only not all of these meetings are public,” The president is “absolutely healthy,” he added, and “his handshake is so strong he breaks hands with it.” All of that may be true—or not. For now, the world must wait and see what happens next.