《双语新闻：“ 失踪 ”十天首露面 普京笑对传言》

Russian President Vladimir Putin reappeared on Monday after 10 unexplained days out of public view, laughing off the "gossip" over his health that had erupted during his absence.

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The 62-year-old leader met the president of Kyrgyzstan at a lavish Tsarist-era palace outside St Petersburg in his first appearance since March 5. His absence had fuelled rumours he was ill, had been overthrown by the army or had even flown abroad to attend the birth of a love child.

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"It would be boring without gossip," Putin said, smiling easily before television cameras. He looked relaxed, if pale.“

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His spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, mocked the press for its interest, referring sarcastically to the various rumours: "So you've seen the broken, paralysed president, who has been captured by generals? He's only just flown in from Switzerland, where he attended a birth as you know."

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In a choreographed double-act, Kyrgyz President Almazbek Atambayev vouched for the Russian leader's health, saying that Putin "just now drove me around the grounds; he himself sat at the wheel."

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Putin's return to public view coincided with Russia's biggest military exercises since ties with the West sank to a post-Cold War low over the Ukraine crisis.

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Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu said Putin had ordered nearly 40,000 troops to be at combat readiness for exercises in Russia's Arctic North and elsewhere, which appeared meant to dwarf war games in neighbouring NATO-member Norway.

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The Russian leader prides himself on his macho image. In 2008 he said he worked like a "galley slave" to run Russia. Typically, he is shown most days on state-controlled television, meeting officials in Moscow or travelling to Russia's far-flung regions.

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During his absence, the Kremlin unexpectedly cancelled a trip to Kazakhstan and a high profile meeting with officers of the main successor agency to the KGB. Pictures were posted on the Kremlin website of meetings Putin had with public figures, which, it later emerged, had been taken several days earlier.

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Throughout his absence Russian officials had said that Putin had been working. Peskov said he had answered "10 times over" what Putin was doing during his absence. "It is impossible to say anymore," he said.

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The military exercises are due to last for much of the week, during which Russia will celebrate the anniversary of its annexation of Ukraine's Crimea peninsula.

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