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Putin Aide: Corruption Was 'Civilized'

By Natalya Krainova

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Corruption in Russia was "normal" and "civilized" during Vladimir Putin's first stint as president and support for him has grown stronger as a result of recent opposition rallies, the prime minister's campaign manager has boasted.

Stanislav Govorukhin conceded that "the fight against bribes and kickbacks has not been led as strongly as it should be," but noted in an interview published Friday in the newspaper Trud that "many laws concerning this were passed before Putin [came to power]."

He also said Putin was "reluctant" to fire officials "who should have been wished goodbye long ago" because of the prime minister's "human weakness."

Transparency International ranked Russia in 143rd place out 183 countries for the worst corruption in its 2011 Global Perception Index — a slight improvement from the year before. Russia is now tied with Nigeria, Azerbaijan and Belarus, among other countries, the survey found.

Govorukhin listed a number of achievements during Putin's time in office, including reining in regional separatism and violence in the North Caucasus, reducing the number of people living below the poverty line from 28 percent to 12 percent, and increasing life expectancy by 3 1/2 years.

He also noted a number of economic improvements, such as Russia now ranking fifth in terms of car sales and third in grain exports, as well as increased housing construction and the development of three major gas pipelines.

Govorukhin praised Putin for managing to "get rid of [about 10,000] foreign consultants, who had flooded the country" and "dictated laws, which did not benefit Russia," he said.

"Today Russia has a mind of its own," Govorukhin said.

The recent series of anti-Putin rallies have actually boosted the prime minister's popularity, Govorukhin argued.

"After them — after this anti-Putin hysteria — provincial people literally throw their chest behind Putin," Govorukhin said, accusing rally organizers of sowing "enmity between the satiated capital and the modestly living provinces."

Govorukhin said he was "not glad" about the idea of returning to direct gubernatorial elections, which Putin — who cancelled them during his prior time in office — now supports.

"I saw a similar situation in the 1990s when not a program, or a personality, but money won the elections," Govorukhin said. "Then the elected governor during his entire term was working out the money that mafia clans spent on his campaign."

Govorukhin — who is also a well-known film director — predicted that Putin would probably win in the first round of the election.

"After we elect Putin, I will be able to return to work on my film with a clean conscience," Govorukhin said, referring to his work on the upcoming screen version of Noel Kalef's novel "Elevator to the Gallows."

Govorukhin said Putin was "interesting" partly "because of his shortcomings" as a human being, like his noted lack of punctuality.

"He is sometimes late for meetings. And forgets to apologize. This is bad," Govorukhin said, adding that people generally forgive him because of Putin's "charm" and sense of humor.

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