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Kremlin Chief of Staff Surprised but Not Alarmed by Navalny

By Andrew McChesney

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Kremlin chief of staff Sergei Ivanov **Igor Tabakov**

Kremlin chief of staff Sergei Ivanov has expressed surprise about the opposition's growing political clout, particularly Alexei Navalny's strong showing in Moscow's mayoral election this month, but indicated that President Vladimir Putin was unconcerned by any threat to his grip on power.

Ivanov, who made the comments in an interview published Tuesday in four Russian newspapers, also saw little reason to worry about a rift in U.S.-Russia relations and, curiously, he and Putin sometimes conversed in Swedish.

Ivanov said he had not expected Navalny to garner 27 percent of the vote in the Sept. 8 election, nearly forcing incumbent Mayor Sergei Sobyanin, who won 51 percent, into a run-off.

"To be honest, I personally was a bit surprised at the high percentage," Ivanov told reporters from Rossiiskaya Gazeta, Komsomolskaya Pravda, RBC Daily and Gazeta.ru as he flew back to Moscow from an international conference in Stockholm.

"But," he added, "you need to remember that 27 percent of the vote — it's all relative. For example, how much did Mikhail Prokhorov win in the presidential election? A little less than 8 percent [nationwide] and 20 percent in Moscow. You know, in absolute terms that is a lot more than Navalny got."

Billionaire Prokhorov was among a handful of candidates who ran against Putin in the 2012 presidential election in long-shot bids that some observers saw as little more than a Kremlin attempt to legitimize Putin's victory.

Ivanov paid grudging respect to Navalny, who faces five years in prison if he fails to convince a court on Oct. 9 to throw out his recent conviction on embezzlement charges, which his supporters call politically motivated.

"I admit that Navalny has very efficiently mobilized his own and the entire protest electorate. I admit this unequivocally," Ivanov said.

But, he said, this does not mean that the ruling authorities owe Navalny any favors, including holding talks with him or offering him a job. "For this you need to prove that you can do something. But first you must win something," he said.

Ivanov told a meeting of Russia experts in the town of Valdai in September that the authorities were open to holding talks with the members of the opposition who heeded the law in their activities.

In the interview, Ivanov indicated that such talks could be held with Yevgeny Roizman, who unexpectedly beat the pro-Putin candidate to win Yekaterinburg's mayoral vote on Sept. 8. He said Roizman's victory put him "in another category of the opposition." But in a sign that the opposition's recent political gains weren't ruffling the Kremlin's feather, Ivanov noted that the local legislature was still controlled by the pro-Kremlin United Russia party.

In Moscow, he said, even the low 32 percent turnout at the mayoral election showed that voters favored the policies of Sobyanin, a close ally of Putin who served as Kremlin chief of staff before Ivanov. "What normal person goes to vote when he is more or less satisfied with the status quo?" he said.

Turning to the U.S.-Russia relations, which have soured in recent months over differences on Syria, Iran and Russia's democratic record, Ivanov said he has "always" had good relations with the Americans and didn't see any cause for concern.

"We defend our interests, and they defend theirs. This is normal," he said. "The president said it well: 'Do not think that we are aiming to please the Americans and that the Americans are aiming to please us.'"

About the Kremlin's recent announcement that former deputy chief of staff Vladislav Surkov had returned as an adviser to Putin, Ivanov said that the appointment had been made "about a month ago" and that Surkov had accepted the post after declining several other Kremlin

offers, including to work on foreign policy.

Speculation that Surkov had returned first broke out on Aug. 20, but the Kremlin only confirmed the appointment on Sept. 20. Surkov, who quit as deputy prime minister in May, is loathed by the opposition, which blames him for repressive legislation enacted against their activities during his years in the Kremlin.

Ivanov sidestepped a question on who is the most powerful politician in Russia after Putin. Following the lead of Putin, he said that it was too early to discuss whether Putin would seek a fourth term in 2018. But, he said, he and the president speak regularly about the short-term future.

In an odd aside, Ivanov said he and Putin sometimes exchange phrases in Swedish. "The president knows German well, and I know English. Swedish is somewhere between," he said. "He will say something in Swedish, and I will answer in the same language. Although he is not a philologist, he loves languages and linguistics."

Ivanov, who like Putin is a former KGB officer, did not say whether he had picked up Swedish while he was posted for several years at Moscow's embassy in Helsinki during Soviet times. Swedish is widely spoken in Finland.

About his personal life, Ivanov denied any political ambitions and said he sometimes preferred animals over people.

"With age I have come to the sad conclusion that it is more comfortable to spend time with cats and dogs than with other people," he said.

He said his main interests outside work revolved around leopards, basketball and the Eifman Ballet, which is based in his native St. Petersburg.

"Why do I love leopards, basketball and ballet? Because they combine everything into one: grace, wisdom, the ability to jump, and craftiness," he said. "I won't deny it. Sometimes this is a very tricky thing for me to do."

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