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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

GRU Spymaster to Lose Job, Report Says

By Alexander Bratersky

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The chief of the military's intelligence service is on his way out after completing a sweeping staff purge that his predecessor refused to conduct, a news report said Tuesday.

Lieutenant General Alexander Shlyakhturov, 63, is expected to be removed as head of the agency, known as GRU, when he returns from sick leave, Izvestia reported, citing unidentified former and acting officers at the country's most secretive siloviki agency.

Shlyakhturov, a protege of Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov, replaced the previous GRU chief, General Valentin Korabelnikov, in 2009. Reports said at the time that Korabelnikov lost his job because he had opposed reforms at the agency.

The incumbent spymaster, described by one Izvestia source as Serdyukov's "silent underling," has fired some 1,000 staff members, cut the number of agency divisions from eight to five and implemented other classified personnel reforms, the daily said.

Shlyakhturov may now be awarded a honorary cushy job elsewhere in the military, it said.

Anatoly Makarov, chief of the General Staff, which oversees the GRU, said Tuesday that Shlyakhturov is keeping his job — for now.

"But we all have our age, and I can't predict" what will happen next, he said, Interfax reported.

Senior military officials have to retire at 60 but may stay on duty until 65, if asked by the president.

A shuffle may be also held off by succession concerns. Retired GRU veteran Vitaly Shlykov told Izvestia that the Defense Ministry has been looking for a replacement after Shlyakhturov's purge for years, but to no avail.

Another former GRU officer, who spoke to Izvestia on condition of anonymity, slammed the reform, saying it had resulted in old professionals stepping down and greenhorns coming in.

GRU veteran Vladimir Kvachkov told The Moscow Times in 2008 that he had proposed the reform as early as 1998 but was turned down by his superiors at the time. "They understood I was right, but the corporate interests won," Kvachkov said of the military top brass.

He spoke shortly before the Supreme Court upheld last year his 2008 acquittal in an attempt on the life on Anatoly Chubais, the architect of the 1990s privatizations. After the ruling, Kvachkov, who became an ultranationalist and anti-Semite after his retirement, was arrested again on suspicion of plotting a coup, although unrelated to the GRU.

Established in 1918 under Leon Trotsky, the GRU is the biggest and most secretive intelligence service in Russia — it does not even maintain a web site, unlike the Federal Security Service and the Foreign Intelligence Service. However, some of its inner workings were revealed by defector Vladimir Rezun, who published a book about its operations in the United States in 1985 under the name "Viktor Suvorov."

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