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Dissecting the Ministry That Shoigu Built

By Alexander Bratersky

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The emergency ministry displaying a firefighting suit at a 2000 exhibit. **Igor Tabakov**

The muscular firefighters in sharp uniforms chatted lightheartedly near a row of well-equipped Iveco firetrucks, ready at a moment's notice to drop the banter and race out to extinguish a blaze.

The equipment inside the fire station in the Moskva City business district is brand new, and there is even a guestroom where exhausted firefighters can plop down to watch Mel Gibson's "The Passion of the Christ" movie or feed fish in an aquarium.

But the atmosphere here was tingling with uncertainty on a recent afternoon as the firefighters, emergency specialists, doctors and other personnel waited for news on who would replace their charismatic boss, Sergei Shoigu, who built the Emergency Situations Ministry from scratch in 20 years and left its helm Friday.

"Shoigu has lifted us up high, and no one knows what might happen next," said a firefighter who only gave his name, Sergei.

Shoigu, 56, was sworn in as the governor of the Moscow region on Friday.

A former construction engineer, Shoigu established the Emergency Situations Ministry. In 1991 at a run-down base used by the Soviet-era civil defense forces.

"Cars didn't have radiators and among the aircraft given to us only one helicopter was able to fly — and it flew only once," Shoigu said in a recent interview with Vedomosti.

Since that time, the ministry has grown into a powerful military-like structure with an annual budget of 180 billion rubles ($6 billion). Its responsibilities have expanded to assisting in emergency operations like fires, floods and earthquakes at home and abroad, making Shoigu the most recognized and popular government official in Russia — even though he holds a senior post in the increasingly unpopular ruling United Russia party.

His ministry has also provided sensitive services to the government, with one of its planes flying released Russian prisoners out of Russia during a 2010 spy swap with the United States.

Shoigu's daughter, Yulia Shoigu, 34, is the ministry's other public face in her work as the head of its psychological services, which provides support to people caught in catastrophes.

During Shoigu's tenure, the ministry has largely avoided serious corruption allegations, with the notable exception of the arrest of a senior ministry official, General Kamil Ganeyev, during the Interior Ministry's "Werewolves With Epithets" anti-corruption campaign in 2003. Ganeyev, who was arrested with six Interior Ministry officials, was sentenced to 20 years in prison in 2005.

In a second scandal, bloggers in 2010 revealed that several regional ministry branches had bought expensive SUVs with money earmarked for firefighting equipment. The revelation couldn't have come at a worse time: deadly wildfires were consuming large swaths of the countryside as Russia experienced the hottest summer on the record books.

But Shoigu escaped both scandals unscathed. After the SUV revelations, his ministry canceled outstanding orders for SUVs, and Shoigu, speaking to The Moscow Times, said the complaints should not be "driven to absurdity" because the SUVs only accounted for 1.5 percent of all vehicles purchased by the ministry.

Shoigu's two-decade stewardship of the ministry has also earned him praise from American colleagues, who have worked with him during relief operations around the world.

"He was an enlightened and experienced partner," said Jess Bratton, a senior international affairs specialist with the U.S. Federal Emergency Management Agency, which has cooperated for 16 years with the Emergency Situations Ministry.

"Our agency could rely on his knowledge of where to find fruitful engagement," he said, adding that "it is our hope that a similarly capable senior official will replace him in his post."

As part of the U.S.-Russia Bilateral Presidential Commission formed by Presidents Barack Obama and Dmitry Medvedev in the summer of 2009, FEMA and the Emergency Situations Ministry have recently collaborated on a number of joint projects through the Emergency Situations Working Group — a body that Shoigu has jointly chaired since its inception.

The working group's most significant achievement last year was shepherding the Russian ministry's airborne search-and-rescue team through the certification process for the highest classification of the United Nations' International Search and Rescue Advisory Group, or INSARAG.

"With this new INSARAG classification, Russia is now better able to coordinate disaster assistance with other global responders and is recognized internationally as having state-of-the-art procedures and practices," the bilateral presidential commission wrote in its 2012 report.

Shoigu's government and party connections have helped him turn the ministry into a powerful force with its own emergency medical center, naval flotilla and fleet of helicopters and planes.

Several ministry employees interviewed for this story said they believed Shoigu's first deputy Vladimir Puchkov, who is now serving as acting minister, would be kept in the position to smooth the transition after Shoigu.

"It would be hard to avoid a reshuffle unless the minister comes from within the system, although it would be done," said a senior Moscow firefighting official, who spoke on condition of anonymity to avoid a reprimand from his superiors.

Firefighters, who were transferred from the Interior Ministry to the Emergency Situations Ministry more than a decade ago, are a 220,000-member force that accounts for most of the ministry's personnel, believed to total 350,000 people.

Some firefighters said life has become better for them after they were transferred from the Interior Ministry to Shoigu's ministry, which started to buy foreign-made firefighting equipment.

But the sparkling fire station in Moskva-City is more of an exception than the rule. The station, staffed with 240 firefighters, was shown off to a visiting delegation of U.S. firefighters recently.

Here, the salary of the average firefighter is 50,000 rubles to 60,000 rubles ($1,500 to $2,000) a month, and station chief Eduard Bondarenko said his desk is stuffed with resumOs from people who want to join the unit.

His firefighters, incidentally, made headlines last month when they extinguished a late-night blaze on the 66th floor of the Federation skyscraper. No one was injured in the blaze.

Firefighters from other Moscow fire stations said they wished their workplaces were as well equipped as Bondarenko's.

"My unit has only four old fire trucks. A new KamAZ fire truck was bought last September, but it is not enough," said Andrei, a deputy captain of a unit who makes about $1,000 per month. "Muscovites don't want to work, and we are suffering from a lack of staff."

He was echoed by Yelena, an Emergency Situations Ministry employee in East Siberia, who said local firefighters earn 15,000 rubles to 18,000 rubles per month and many are calling it

quits. "The salary is not sufficient for a job like this, so the rate of personnel turnover is high," she said.

Firefighting officials acknowledge that some equipment is old and that there is a lack of firefighters, especially in the regions. About 34 percent of all firefighting equipment needs to be replaced, said Major General Nikolai Grechushkin, who leads the Emergency Situations Ministry's equipment supplies department.

The tough situation with regional firefighting units was revealed during the wildfires of 2010. In response, the ministry announced a program to buy new equipment and keep a closer eye on how earmarked funds are spent.

About 43 billion rubles ($1.5 billion) will be spent to buy new equipment for the ministry's firefighters through 2015. "This program aims to buy high-quality equipment," Grechushkin told Ekho Moskvy radio in December.

While officials say reforms that have been started within the ministry will continue after Shoigu leaves, employees on the ground fear that the ministry might follow the path of the Interior Ministry, where reforms initiated by former President Dmitry Medvedev are widely considered a failure.

The personnel is understandably worried about the departure of Shoigu, a political heavyweight who was able to influence Cabinet decisions regarding the ministry, said Maxim Agarkov, an independent researcher who writes on security issues.

"But there is no need to reform an organization that works rather effectively," he said. "The government has more serious issues to deal with, like the Interior and Health and Social Development ministries."

A minister's job can be difficult, as Shoigu indicated at a farewell party in his ministry a few days ago. He pulled out a horse collar and promised to put it on his successor as a symbol of the hard work ahead. "I hope it will fit him," he said.

Staff writer Alexander Winning contributed to this report.

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