

What Serdyukov and Sobchak Have in Common

By [Alexander Golts](#)

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The generals' longtime dream has come true. President Vladimir Putin on Tuesday signed the decree dismissing Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov. Only a couple of months ago, right after Putin's May inauguration, Serdyukov did not hide the fact that he would like to leave his post. But Putin opposed the move because he believed Serdyukov was needed to finish the important reforms that he had started. Now, however, Serdyukov, who found himself in the middle of a corruption scandal, has been given the boot in a humiliating fashion.

Serdyukov's dismissal shows that the government's degradation has reached a new level. Only a short time ago it seemed as if Serdyukov, a Putin loyalist, had nothing in common with the likes of opposition figures Alexei Navalny, Ksenia Sobchak and Leonid Razvozzhayev. Now they are all in the same boat together.

Early in the morning of Oct. 25, the official website of the Investigative Committee reported that its agents had seized documents at Oboronservis, the company authorized to sell Defense Ministry assets. Investigative Committee spokesman Vladimir Markin announced that five

criminal cases would be filed against senior officials at Oboronservis. They are accused of deliberately understating the value of Defense Ministry real estate and then selling it to companies linked to Oboronservis.

Soon afterward, information appeared on Lifenews.ru — the same website that regularly publishes the wiretap transcripts of opposition activists' phone conversations — that Investigative Committee agents had found Serdyukov at the apartment of the ministry's former property department head, Yevgenia Vasilyeva, during an early morning raid.

Later the same day, Serdyukov met with Putin who, according to his spokesman, urged the defense minister to "cooperate with the investigation." The tabloids immediately leaked information that huge sums of money had been found during the raid on Vasilyeva's apartment. These reports sounded exactly like the raid on Sobchak's apartment in which more than 1 million euros were seized. The only difference was that more money was found in Vasilyeva's apartment than in Sobchak's. Corruption in the Defense Ministry was the top story on television news programs, although it is highly unusual for state-controlled television to publicize damaging information about senior officials.

Oboronservis was created three years ago to deal with most maintenance-related functions of the armed services, including the repair of military equipment at factories belonging to the Defense Ministry and providing food for military personnel and heating for their homes. The goal was to free military officials of purely routine duties so they could focus exclusively on the combat training of the troops entrusted to them.

It was not surprising that many officers opposed the measures since they were cut off from an important source of corruption. Meanwhile, many employees at Oboronservis quickly filled the gap. The temptation to embezzle funds increased exponentially when the Defense Ministry initiated reforms that required it to sell off property, including expensive real estate assets in Moscow.

Without a doubt, the Serdyukov affair was orchestrated at the very top of the ruling elite. It began with corruption charges against individuals with close ties to Serdyukov. The current investigation also includes insinuations about Serdyukov's private life, a standard tactic for the country's law enforcement agencies.

There can be no doubt that only a top official could have given approval for such an attack against Serdyukov. It was unlikely to have come from the president, who has always supported Serdyukov, particularly since Serdyukov made it known after Putin's re-election that he was ready to step down at any time. Nonetheless, in the end Putin was forced to dismiss Serdyukov.

It seems that the bureaucratic clans acted without Putin's permission. The appointment of Moscow region Governor Sergei Shoigu as Serdyukov's replacement is clear evidence that this was an emergency situation. What was the point of removing him from a gubernatorial post that he had occupied for only six months?

Serdyukov might have been in conflict with Sergei Ivanov, the former defense minister who is now the head of the presidential administration. According to this version, Ivanov cannot forgive Serdyukov for successfully carrying out the reforms that Ivanov messed up. Another

version is that Serdyukov locked horns with Dmitry Rogozin, who is eager to increase his control of military resources in his capacity as deputy prime minister in charge of the defense industry.

In any case, it seems that law enforcement agencies have once again become weapons of - inter-clan fighting. What's more, those agencies are using the same techniques they used against opponents of the regime: early morning raids and leaks of compromising information to the tabloids. The widely respected Serdyukov could never have dreamed in his worst nightmares that he would be subjected to the same humiliating measures as Navalny and Sobchak.

But every historical process unfolds according to its own internal logic. Once law enforcement agencies were given carte blanche to crack down on the opposition, they naturally used the same methods when told to go after members of rival clans.

Besides Serdyukov, the other victim of the feud was military reforms. This is particularly regrettable because they were the only example over the past 10 years when a ministry was able to successfully initiate serious reforms.

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