

Shoigu Has Lots of Fires to Put Out in the Army

By [Alexander Golts](#)

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After Sergei Shoigu was appointed to replace Anatoly Serdyukov as defense minister last week, he was placed under a microscope as analysts pondered what his first steps would be in his new capacity. On Friday, Valery Gerasimov was appointed as new head of the General Staff, replacing Nikolai Makarov. It is widely believed that Gerasimov did not get along with Makarov, but this is nonsense. If Makarov had disliked Gerasimov, he never would have named him commander of the Central Military District in April. But Shoigu has far more important things to worry about as he takes over the Defense Ministry.

Serdyukov's most significant military reforms were based on the notion that Russia should not maintain a mass-mobilization army, a concept that had dominated strategic planning for the past 150 years. Prior to Serdyukov's reforms, Moscow had planned to defend the country with more than a million soldiers. But Serdyukov's reforms called for a reduction to 700,000 reservists, even in times of war. Serdyukov eliminated about 1,000 skeleton units, meaning that the remaining units were adequately staffed and battle-ready without the need for additional reservists.

From the start, Serdyukov's plans to reduce the size of the armed forces ran into fierce opposition from those who insisted that Russia still needs a million-man army.

Even with the target dropped to 700,000 soldiers, the military is still facing manpower shortages like it faced during the 1990s and the Russia-Georgia war in 2008. According to media reports, the army is addressing the problem by forming a single battle-ready battalion in each brigade in exactly the same way that battalions were formed in each airborne division during the second Chechen war. Considering that the army contains about 50 army brigades and seven airborne brigades, it means that at any given moment, the Kremlin has only 57 battle-ready battalions to defend the country during a war.

One solution would be to increase the number of contract soldiers. The Defense Ministry had proposed increasing their ranks by 50,000 professional soldiers and sergeants per year until their numbers reach 415,000.

Clearly, the question of how to staff the armed forces is one of the most important that Shoigu must address. More than likely, the generals who have been attacking Serdyukov's reforms are trying to use the current situation to convince Shoigu and President Vladimir Putin to reverse those reforms and return to the Soviet model, arguing that the shortfall in troops can be overcome by increasing the mandatory term for conscripts from one year to two — or better yet, three years. (Under Serdyukov, the conscript term was shortened to one year in 2009.)

Another problem facing Shoigu is implementing the 23 trillion ruble (\$728 billion) modernization program for the army. The country's defense manufacturing sector simply cannot produce the type of high-tech weaponry needed to modernize the army. In Soviet times, civilian enterprises operating on nonmarket principles produced all of the components for sophisticated weapons. In the 1990s, those firms either closed their doors or changed their focus. As a result, Russia cannot mass-produce weapons systems and military equipment for the simple reason that plants are forced to manufacture some components by hand.

In appointing Gerasimov as new head of the General Staff, Putin alluded to the real reason for the change of leadership in the Defense Ministry. "We have a problem," Putin said during a meeting with Gerasimov on Friday. "We need to focus on the long term. I hope that you and the defense minister will be able to build a stable and good working relationship with our leading defense industry firms."

Putin was basically telling Gerasimov to forget about the previous goal of producing modern weapons and that the army should be satisfied with whatever weapons the domestic industry is capable of producing. At the same time, military officials will have to pretend that they are taking delivery of modern weapons even when they receive obsolete equipment whose prototypes were developed 30 or 40 years ago.

Beyond the ouster of Serdyukov and appointment of Shoigu, Putin had another important goal: to end the conflict between the Defense Ministry and members of his inner circle, including Kremlin chief of staff Sergei Ivanov, Russian Technologies head Sergei Chemezov and Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin.

The intransigence of the Defense Ministry under Serdyukov became a political problem when

it refused to place orders for what it considered substandard and overpriced equipment. This refusal was a serious blow to the factories where Putin's core electorate is employed. Thus, Serdyukov was preventing Putin from funneling trillions of rubles to industries that employ his loyal constituency.

How will Shoigu deal with this problem? Shoigu is arguably the most appealing figure in the current government. He is willing to take responsibility, and he brings organizational skills and tremendous experience to this job. Shoigu's claim to fame is his success as emergency situations minister since 1994. From the rubble of the Soviet civil defense forces, composed largely of unqualified officers, Shoigu built an outstanding corps of highly motivated, confident rescue workers.

Let's hope that Shoigu as defense minister will stand up to the generals who dream of reversing Serdyukov's reforms. But the pressure for him to "clean house" might lead him to undo reforms that Serdyukov worked so hard to implement. Russian history has shown that there are no reforms that are too important to reverse.

Alexander Golts is deputy editor of the online newspaper Yezhednevny Zhurnal.

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