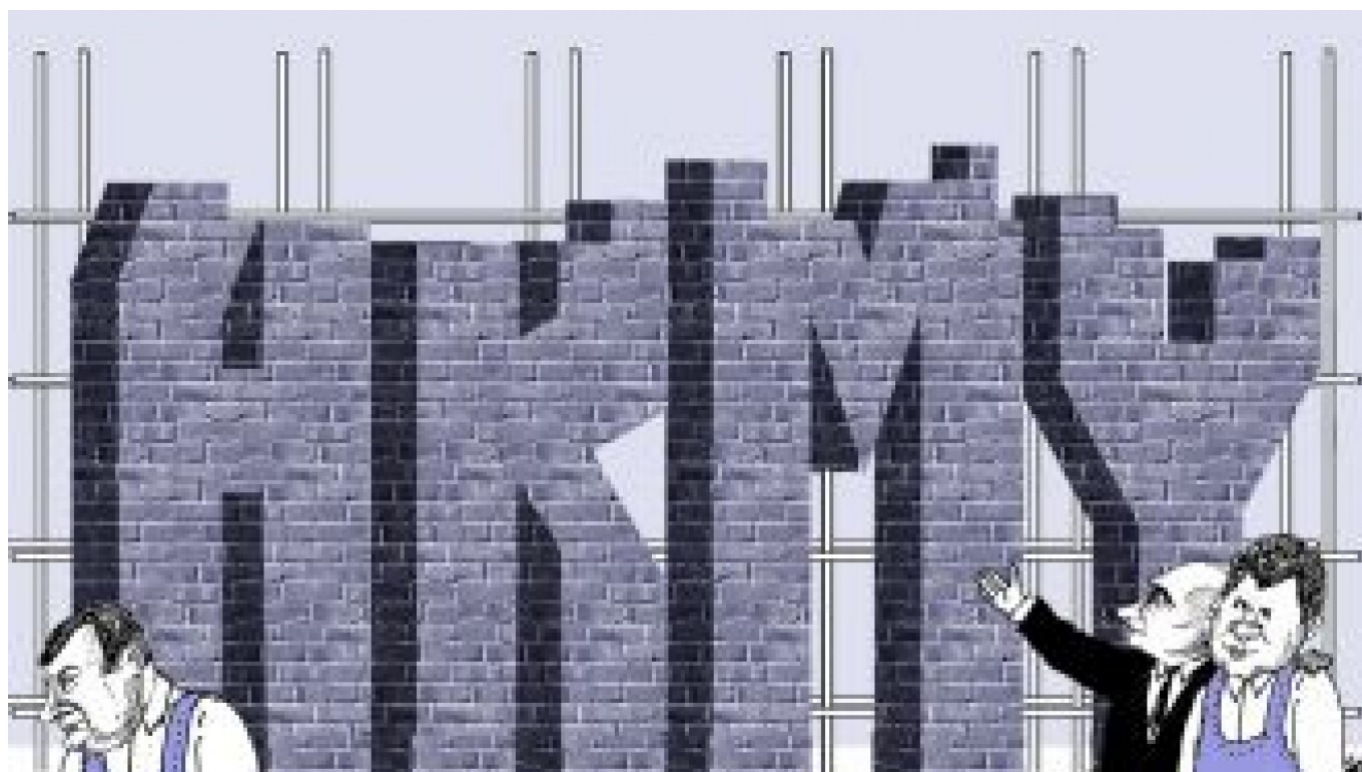


Serdyukov Leaves Big Shoes to Fill

By [Ruslan Pukhov](#)

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The dismissal of Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov prompted a storm of joyful shouts from a variety of places. Looking back, however, it is probably less amazing that Serdyukov was fired but that he managed to hang onto his post for almost six years.

From the beginning, it was clear that President Vladimir Putin brought in Serdyukov to implement what was perhaps the most challenging task before the government: cleaning house at the Defense Ministry and bringing to the armed forces some form of accountability and battle readiness.

Attempts at military reforms have been made continuously since the Soviet collapse, and they have just as continuously ended in failure. By 2007, when Serdyukov took office, the armed forces were a shriveled semblance of the once-mighty Soviet Army, retaining all minuses of the Soviet-era forces and none of their pluses. The Russian army suffered from a chronic lack of funding and had an archaic structure, inadequate training, demoralized personnel with no desire to serve, obsolete and worn-out equipment and an enormous and burdensome infrastructure.

The result was an army of 1.2 million people with less than 10 percent ready to fight. All military reformers from the first Russian Defense Minister Pavel Grachev onward had attempted to solve these problems by creating separate battle-ready units and commands, but that only led to the creation of two parallel armies that the government could not afford due to the lack of resources.

An improved economic situation in the second half of the 2000s made it possible to increase defense spending, but that led to the discovery that huge amounts of money were disappearing without any tangible results.

The time was ripe — even overripe — for drastic military reforms. It was clear that tough and decisive action was needed to establish tight control over cash flows in the Defense Ministry, make deep cuts to the armed forces and radically restructure the entire military system.

Putin used Serdyukov to perform the crude, ruthless and cold-blooded operation.

Serdyukov, the onetime manager of a furniture store and former head of the Federal Tax Service, was an affront to all the instincts and traditions of the military hierarchy. His management style of unexpectedly introducing a flurry of administrative measures and installing female tax officials was very consistent with that image. Not since the time of Leon Trotsky had there been a defense minister who caused such a shock or elicited so much hatred in this country.

Yet it is clear that the reforms begun in 2008 were not Serdyukov's. They were, from start to finish, Putin's. Once they were finished, Putin showed Serdyukov the door, letting his minister make a quick exit as catcalls and expletives accompanied his retreat.

But Serdyukov was unexpectedly good in his role, and he pushed through the military reforms at a remarkable pace. His success turned what was originally supposed to be a temporary hit-and-run task into a stint of almost six years.

Now it is safe to say that Serdyukov accomplished more than anyone had expected of him. With unprecedented rapidity, the armed forces took on a new look that differs fundamentally in many ways from the traditional image of the Red Army, the Soviet Army and, later, the Russian Army. Those changes have affected all the main elements of Russia's armed forces: their size, agencies, management, structures and officer training systems.

However, as a ruthless reformer, Serdyukov became too much of a political liability for Putin, who is experiencing a crisis among his electoral base and is drifting toward a more conservative populist approach similar to that of Belarussian President Alexander Lukashenko and Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez. Hard-hitting social reforms, which are ongoing, have undermined Putin's goal of looking after his core electorate, thereby necessitating a little "populist therapy" with Serdyukov's dismissal.

Thus, the hated Serdyukov has been noisily replaced with the popular Sergei Shoigu, who was immediately presented as a military general. It doesn't matter that no one, not even Putin, can explain why Shoigu is so popular.

What's more, Serdyukov at least once served as an enlisted soldier, whereas Shoigu was only a lieutenant in the reserves before being promoted to the rank of general. The military establishment is now naively claiming that Shoigu is one of its own, although it is obvious that he will continue Putin's military reforms and that defense policy as a whole is unlikely to undergo any major changes.

Serdyukov represented more than an effective defense minister and an able administrator who carried out military reforms of great importance for the country. For the first time in Russia's post-Soviet history, the Kremlin developed a truly comprehensive plan for the radical reform of the armed forces.

But more important, the Defense Ministry demonstrated the political and administrative will to implement it. Serdyukov was more than up to the task and was probably the best defense minister this country has had since Trotsky, who created the Red Army. Serdyukov laid the foundation for a modern Russian army, and for that accomplishment he received more blame than fame. He deserves the country's praise.

But a long road lies ahead for Russia to finish building a modern military machine. For its continued development, the Army will need strong and effective management and the firm subordination of "corporate" military interests to the interests of the state as a whole — that is, a continuation of the policy Serdyukov attempted to instill in the Defense Ministry. The success of Shoigu and all subsequent defense ministers will be measured by their ability to follow Serdyukov's example.

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