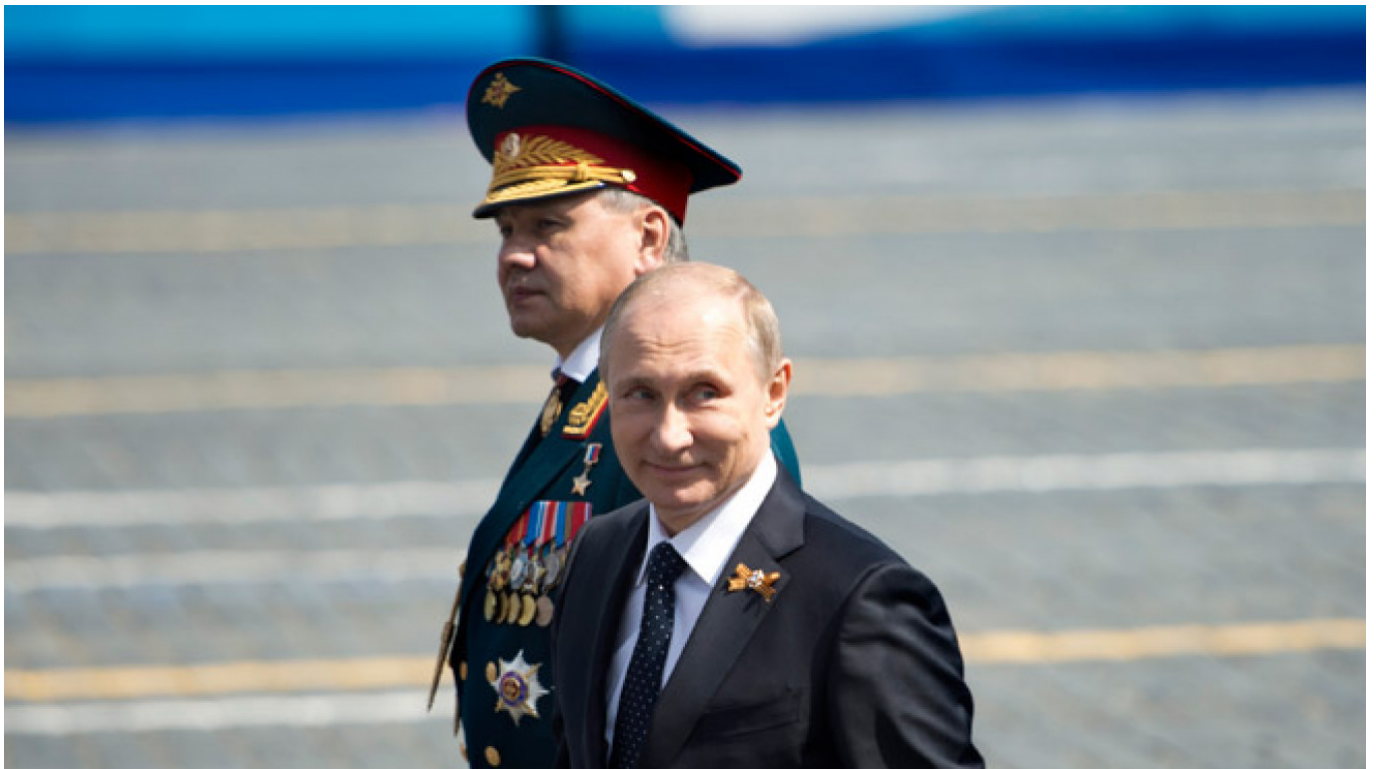


# Shoigu at 60: The Man Who Would Be Russia's King?

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Shoigu has been one of Putin's closest allies since 1999.

Russia's Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, a close ally, friend and rumored potential successor of President Vladimir Putin in the Kremlin, turned 60 on Thursday.

"A servant to the tsar, a father to soldiers," political pundits say of Shoigu — one of the country's longest-serving government officials — citing Mikhail Lermontov's poem and pointing to Shoigu's main political trait: loyalty.

For the three last years, Russians have named Shoigu "Person of the Year" behind only Putin, according to polls by the independent Levada Center. Last month, Shoigu took second place behind the president in a rating of Russian officials and politicians in which respondents were asked to choose several names from a list as the most trustworthy leaders. Shoigu was chosen by 26 percent of respondents, ahead of Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, who was named by 21 percent. Putin was chosen by 60 percent of respondents.

The polls were conducted among 1,600 respondents with a margin of error not exceeding 3.4 percent.

The political longevity and widespread public acclaim of Shoigu have prompted analysts to name him Putin's potential successor either at the next presidential election in 2018, or in 2024.

Pundits interviewed by The Moscow Times on Thursday put this hypothesis into doubt.

"No one with the surname Shoigu could ever be elected Russia's president," said Stanislav Belkovsky, a prominent political analyst, referring to the defense minister's origins from the remote Siberian republic of Tuva, where animistic shamanism is practiced by the population along with Tibetan Buddhism.

"Unlike the Soviet Union, Russia is a nation state, where only people with a Russian surname can occupy the Kremlin," Belkovsky said in a phone interview.

At his 2013 call-in show, Putin was asked whether he considers Shoigu his future successor.

"The people of the Russian Federation will choose my successor," Putin responded.

Other analysts said it is too early to predict Putin's eventual successor, and that Putin may remain in office for the rest of his life.

## **The Shoigu Story**

Shoigu was born to an ethnic Russian mother and an ethnic Tuvan father in Tuva near Siberia's Altai Mountains. For years, rumors swirled that Shoigu practiced Buddhism or shamanism, but in a 2008 interview with Ekho Moskvyy radio station he said that he was baptized in the Orthodox faith at the age of 5. In a heavily publicized move on May 9, Shoigu crossed himself beneath one of the Kremlin towers minutes before the Victory Day military parade in Moscow.

A construction engineer by profession, Shoigu's career took off fast. At the age of 28, he oversaw 10,800 prisoners working on the construction of the huge Sayanogorsk aluminum plant in the Siberian republic of Khakasia. More than 10 years later, one of Russia's richest men, Oleg Deripaska, would begin his career there.

Later Shoigu had to manage far larger groups of people. By the 2000s, the Emergency Situations Ministry that he had set up in 1994 had grown into a 350,000-strong operation with its own special forces, according to the Vedomosti business daily.

In 1993 he helped Boris Yeltsin with manpower and weapons in the latter's standoff with parliament, earning his lifelong trust. Before Putin came to power in 1999, Shoigu was considered a potential successor to Yeltsin.

During his time as emergencies minister, Shoigu unfailingly appeared at all major disasters, and sometimes at minor ones, stoically standing with barely a muscle moving in his face. In these appearances, his precise, short orders and comments to the media radiated a sense of confidence that most Russians had longed for.

## Political Asset

Over time, Shoigu became a very attractive figure for politics. In 1999 he was chosen to lead the Unity party in the 1999 State Duma elections. In an alliance with the Fatherland-All Russia political bloc, that party later morphed into United Russia, the country's current ruling party that rubber stamps Putin's initiatives in the Duma.

Shoigu has been one of Putin's closest allies since that time. In 2012 he was appointed defense minister after a series of corruption scandals brought the reign of his predecessor Anatoly Serdyukov to an abrupt end. Under Shoigu, Russian soldiers have executed the annexation of Crimea and been accused by Ukraine and NATO countries of fighting with pro-Russian insurgents in Ukraine's east.

"Russia's sovereignty, which is secured by its army and navy, will always be the obstacle against which during the 1,152 years of Russia's existence many Western rulers have broken their teeth," Shoigu told the TASS news agency in October.

In November 2013, a year after he took the helm of the Defense Ministry, the state-run pollster VTsIOM conducted a survey of Russians' attitudes toward Shoigu. At the time, 46 percent said that they respected him, 35 percent said they trusted him and 15 percent said they sympathized with him.

The poll was conducted among 1,600 people with the margin of error not exceeding 3.4 percent.

Even political enemies of Putin such as Boris Berezovsky and Boris Nemtsov called Shoigu a decent and competent man, as reported by Vedomosti.

Over the years, Putin has become friends with Shoigu, with whom he apparently shares a love for wild nature and fishing. In 2013, Shoigu took Putin fishing in his native Tuva, where Putin was reported by media to have caught a 20-kilogram pike and stayed in a traditional yurt.

Despite his considerable political capital and the support of the general public, Shoigu has consistently stayed away from politics. This has earned him a reputation as Putin's "do it" man and could explain, analysts say, why he has never been removed from government as a potential political threat.

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