

Is This Russia's Next Leader?

For the first time in his seven years as Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu gave a lengthy interview to a mainstream Russian newspaper. We should pay attention.

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How do you campaign for an election that doesn't exist? Or lobby against policies that you're meant to support? In late Putinism, the answer is often to do so publicly, loudly, but deniably. Politics is in the air, after all, with a sense that the country's future, so long locked behind walls of conformity and conservatism, may be up for grabs.

As I wrote in my last [column](#), this also means debate has erupted within the elite, on everything from succession to stimulus, personalia to policy.

Perhaps the most striking expression of this was the recent [interview](#) Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu gave to the middle-brow pro-government newspaper Moskovskii Komsomolets in

September. The perennially popular Shoigu is paradoxically reclusive and ubiquitous. He is forever on screen and page, briefing the president (or hunting and hiking with him), presiding over pyrotechnic military exercises, or dispensing carefully calculated sound bites.

He rarely exposes himself to anything more discursive or wide-ranging, though. As he himself notes at its beginning, this is the first detailed interview he has given in seven years. So this matters.

Technocratic triumph

Much of the interview was devoted to Shoigu's role in the revival of the Russian armed forces 'as if by magic,' culminating in their successful deployment to Syria. There, according to the defense minister, the Russians took on 'the largest terrorist organization of many thousands,' equipped with 'hundreds of tanks' and 'the most advanced technology.' Yet the Russians triumphed, and in the process their officer corps is now blooded, their tactics improved and their technologies tested.

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This is, of course, all thanks to Shoigu. He waves away as 'wrong and immodest' the invitation to talk about a 'Shoigu phenomenon' but is nonetheless all too happy to expound on his ethic that, 'wherever I work, I always tried to work with maximum efficiency and achieve results.' Several times we are reminded of Shoigu's first career, in the construction sector. The heavy signaling is that this is a practical man, one not afraid to roll up his sleeves and do whatever needs to be done.

Indeed, as his dream, he claimed his heart's desire was to leave the pampered confines of Moscow and head back east, to Siberia, and to regain the can-do attitude that built such glories as the Bratsk hydroelectric power station (hopefully without the forced labor and terror that was involved). There he would love to build a city, to build two!

Sergei the Builder, can he fix it? Sergei the Builder, yes he can.

It is clearly important that the narrative of Shoigu as savior of the military not be challenged, because this is central to his technocratic claims. After the interview, Ilya Kramnik, a serious and hardly subversive defense analyst wrote a commentary on it for *Izvestia* in which he largely accepted Shoigu's wider assessments but — rightly — questioned the hagiographic representation of him as the sole rebuilder of the military.

Kramnik noted that the reforms Shoigu pushed forward were actually initiated under his disgraced predecessor Anatoly Serdyukov and former Chief of the General Staff Nikolai Makarov. (Shoigu was given an opportunity to praise Serdyukov in the interview; he passed.) This was factually accurate but politically unacceptable and Kramnik was [sacked](#) and his article purged from *Izvestia*'s website.

Why such a sharp and uncompromising response? It is not so much that Shoigu is thin-skinned so much as that this interview could be read as his application to be Dmitry Medvedev's successor as prime minister and thus, the conventional wisdom goes, maybe even

potential presidential successor. Now, it is worth being cautious: Medvedev has been written off many times before and is still in office.

In part, this is because he does what his job requires — marshals the state bureaucracy and shoulders the blame for whatever goes wrong — loyally and effectively. Perhaps more to the point, there is a clear awareness that if he is replaced then the next prime minister will be considered a successor-in-waiting and Putin likely wants to avoid all the fevered speculation that entails.

This may be irrelevant, though. Politics is all about perceptions, and whether the president and his political technologists like it or not, 2019 has been the year when people began seriously and openly talking about 2024 (when Putin's present and — constitutionally — last term in office ends), succession and even what a post-Putin Russia might look like. In such an environment, individuals may not want to campaign, but faced with the risk of rivals stealing a march on them, they may have campaigning thrust upon them.

Blueprint or billet doux?

If viewed as a political manifesto, what can we read into Shoigu's interview? Obviously the representation of Shoigu as the tough and effective technocrat, the detail-oriented executive — we hear about the 35,000 showers, 16,000 washing machines and 21,000 vacuum cleaners bought for the barracks — is at the heart of his appeal.

After all, the job of prime minister is really to be the majordomo of the tsar's estates, the man who keeps the staff on their toes, the pantry stocked, the beds made and the peasants busy. Given that he would be standing for an election with just one voter, he needs to demonstrate that he is able and eager for the job.

So far, although Economic Development Minister Maxim Oreshkin has incautiously hinted at higher ambitions, the only other candidate who seems to be making a serious pitch is Rostec CEO Sergei Chemezov. Again through a lengthy interview, in the business newspaper [RBC](#), he also laid out his technocratic credentials as a man of business and purpose, on top of topics ranging from digital commerce and arms sales to waste disposal and road tolls.

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However, Chemezov also took the bold step of positioning himself as something of a liberal figure, criticizing the treatment of protesters in Moscow, affirming the importance of a political opposition (even saying that it would be a good thing for some to get onto the city council), and treating Putin's departure from office in 2024 as a done deal. Shoigu, unable to match his rival's deployment of managerial nostrums of effective governance and the digital economy, instead chose to double down on his strengths and played the patriot card.

The West, Shoigu affirms, has set itself the task of 'destroying and enslaving our country,' a process dating back to the beyond the 1990s. Having developed 'patterns and algorithms for overthrowing any legal authority inconvenient for them in any country,' needless to say 'all done under the banner of promoting democracy,' it is the West who truly created and deployed 'hybrid warfare.'

Much of this is long-standing Kremlin rhetoric, but the sharpness of Shoigu's rhetoric is quite striking, as he seeks to wrap himself in the tricolor. In part, this is about reinforcing his status as warrior. Although Shoigu has never been a soldier, he has been awarded the prestigious Hero of the Russian Federation medal (like his potential rival Chemezov) and his frequent appearance in uniform helps bolster his image as a man of action and defender of the Motherland. In his interview, he presents himself as someone who 'knows very well what war is,' citing above all his role in 1990s hotspots in the former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, glossing over the fact that this was in his role as Emergency Situations Minister.

But beyond that, he is projecting an image as the ultimate patriot, loyal to both Russia and the 'Supreme Commander.' He repeatedly conflates the two, and credits Putin with being the military's guardian angel and inspiration.

So far, so political. Is there any programmatic substance to Shoigu's lengthy application letter? Not really. Admittedly, there is a limit to how far he could go; Chemezov likewise confines himself mainly to generalities. But it is nonetheless striking how little there is here behind the self-promotion and the nationalistic rhetoric. When the interviewer cited Audit Council head Alexei Kudrin's critique that too much is spent on the military, Shoigu's reply was simply that the answer was not to cut defense spending, but to increase the national income by cutting waste. Whenever a politician claims that his spending programs can be paid for by efficiency cuts, you know he has no real plan.

But then again, that would be missing the point. This was Sergei Kuzhugetovich Shoigu, a man almost unique by Russian standards for both being genuinely successful in successive roles and managing not to make mortal enemies in the process, writing his love letter to Putin.

And this, perversely, is the problem for the boss. Without seeming to want to, he is now presiding over a political competition. Once Chemezov and Shoigu begin their campaign, others will feel obliged to enter lest they lose by default. The more they do, the more Medvedev's position begins to look in doubt, whether or not Putin actually wants him replaced. Yet if Putin tries to quash this emerging contest, that would inevitably be regarded as an endorsement of Medvedev and even a hint about succession.

Governance by indirection, by hints and whispers, has been central to Putin's style of rule, but it is arguably becoming dysfunctional. Whether he likes it or not, he is the judge in a new beauty contest, and one that is predicated on the departure not just of the prime minister, but ultimately, of the president.

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