

Putin Bestows Birthday Medal on Loyal Defense Chief

By [AFP](#)

May 21, 2020



Known for unshakable loyalty to Putin, Shoigu has often accompanied the president on macho fishing and wildlife-spotting trips. **Mikhail Metzel / TASS**

Russian President Vladimir Putin on Thursday bestowed a 65th birthday honor on Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, his loyal ally in the Syria conflict and companion on wilderness trips.

Putin sent Shoigu birthday greetings and signed a decree awarding him one of Russia's highest decorations, the "For Merit to the Fatherland" medal in the first degree.

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Previous recipients of the medal include Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, Oscar-winning film director Nikita Mikhalkov and the late cellist Mstislav Rostropovich.

Shoigu, an engineer by training who led the emergency ministry before heading the armed

forces, already has a chestful of medals that he wears on occasions such as the Victory Day parade on Red Square.

These include the very prestigious Hero of Russia star.

One of Russia's most popular officials who first came to public attention fighting fires and floods, Shoigu rarely makes political statements.

He comes from the remote Siberian Tuva region close to the border with Mongolia, and is one of the few representatives of Russia's ethnic minorities in top politics.

As defense chief since 2012, he has presided over a massive modernization of the armed forces with latest-generation weaponry including hypersonic missiles and reinforced troop presence from the Arctic to the Pacific.

He has also overseen Russia's military intervention in Syria since 2015 in support of President Bashar al-Assad.

Known for unshakable loyalty to Putin, Shoigu has often accompanied the president on macho fishing and wildlife-spotting trips.

These included one in 2008 where Putin shot a Siberian tiger with a tranquilizer dart and then kissed it.

On their most recent trip in October, they picked mushrooms by the banks of the Yenisei River in Siberia.

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