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In Major Shakeup, Putin Replaces Defense Minister Shoigu

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Sergei Shoigu and Vladimir Putin. **Mikhail Klimentyev / TASS**

In a major shakeup, President Vladimir Putin has nominated former First Deputy Prime Minister Andrei Belousov to replace longtime Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, the upper-house Federation Council announced Sunday night.

The ouster of Shoigu, a longtime Putin ally, comes nearly a week after Putin was sworn into a fifth term in office, cementing his more than two-decade rule even further as Moscow presses forward with its war with neighboring Ukraine.

Belousov, 65, has held several positions in government over the past decade, from economic development minister and presidential economic assistant to acting prime minister and first deputy prime minister.

When asked about Belousov's lack of military experience, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told journalists that a civilian official heading the Defense Ministry would open it up "to innovation, to the introduction of all advanced ideas."

“It’s very important to integrate the economy of the security bloc into the country’s economy so that it meets current needs,” Peskov was quoted as saying by state media.

Putin has also dismissed Security Council chief Nikolai Patrushev, long considered a key member of Putin’s inner circle, “in connection with his transfer to another job,” according to a presidential decree.

Shoigu will take Patrushev’s place as head of the Security Council, an executive branch body overseeing strategic and national security issues.

Peskov said the Kremlin would reveal Patrushev’s new position in the coming days.

Shoigu, a longtime Putin ally who has led the invasion of Ukraine, had until now withstood a series of failures in the war and a mutiny by the Wagner mercenary group in the summer of 2023.

The replacement comes weeks after the arrest of Deputy Defense Minister Timur Ivanov, who was seen as a close Shoigu ally, on bribery charges.

Tatiana Stanovaya, a political analyst and founder of the R.Politik project, said Shoigu's transfer to the Security Council proves that the body is merely a place where Putin keeps former key officials who can't be sacked outright.

Stanovaya added that she expects "something new" to be placed under Patrushev's purview.

"It is now important for Putin to make sure that the enormous sums of money spent on war are not stolen," Andrei Kolesnikov, a senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, wrote on X (formerly Twitter). "But Belousov will now ruin his reputation forever as an accomplice."

"Belousov was responsible for technological development. The Kremlin believes he will technologize the economy and turn it into a military economy. And the military will pull GDP growth. Star Wars economy," Kolesnikov wrote. "Which is what the USSR blew up on."

Apart from the major shakeup in the Defense Ministry, most top officials kept their positions, with Putin reappointing Sergei Lavrov as foreign minister, Alexander Bortnikov as Federal Security Service (FSB) head, Sergei Narishkin as Foreign Intelligence Service head, Konstantin Chuychenko as justice minister, and Alexander Kurenkov as emergencies minister, among others.

So, too, was the son of longtime Putin ally Yury Kovalchuk appointed to chair Russia’s Audit Chamber, a post that has remained empty since its previous chairman, systemic liberal Alexei Kudrin, was dismissed in November 2022.

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