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Shoigu Grows Increasingly Vulnerable as Putin's Favor Wanes

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Russian Security Council Secretary Sergei Shoigu. **Gavriil Grigorov / POOL / kremlin.ru**

In late September, in the Siberian republic of Tyva almost 5,000 kilometers from Moscow, the Great Khural regional parliament convened to swear in its new cohort of deputies at the start of its fall session.

But as soon as the festive opening was over, the expression of Ruslan Tsalikov, the most notorious of these new deputies, visibly soured. Tsalikov was expecting to be nominated as Tyva's senator in Russia's upper-house Federation Council — but the matter was never raised.

"The naked eye could see how upset he was. After all, Ruslan Khadzhismelovich is a very experienced apparatchik. But even he could not hide his feelings," a person who attended the meeting told The Moscow Times.

It was clear that a political scandal was unfolding.

Tsalikov, a longtime close ally and personal PR handler of former Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, had served as Shoigu's deputy minister for nearly 12 years and resigned shortly after Shoigu was dismissed in May.

When he was elected to the Great Khural in Shoigu's home region in September, Tsalikov had hoped to return to Moscow as the region's senator rather than stay in Tyva. Shoigu, widely seen as Tyva's informal overseer, personally lobbied for Tsalikov's nomination, The Moscow Times understands.

"Shoigu initially wanted to bring Tsalikov, an old friend, to the Security Council. And when he failed, he dragged his friend and protégé to the Federation Council," a source told The Moscow Times, speaking on condition of anonymity for safety reasons.

Shoigu floated Tsalikov's candidacy in a conversation with President Vladimir Putin, another source told The Moscow Times.

Shoigu and Tsalikov believed the matter was settled. The nomination was supposed to take place at the first session of the Great Khural, where the former deputy defense minister arrived in high spirits.

"Shoigu's opponents have intervened. Now there's an administrative struggle. Tsalikov is still likely to be appointed [as senator], but it's not certain," a senior Russian official told The Moscow Times.

The unexpected delay surprised many in Tyva. The regional parliament later announced that it had a month to appoint a senator, according to the law. The senator nomination may be considered at the Great Khural's second session, a source in Tyva told The Moscow Times.

Even if Tsalikov is eventually appointed, the incident highlights the fading influence of Shoigu, once Russia's most popular government official who even earned the nickname "Batman" for his public image as a rescuer of the people.

Five months after his dismissal as defense minister and appointment as Security Council secretary, Shoigu, a former favorite of Putin, is still not back in the Russian president's good graces — and his position is increasingly precarious, five individuals within the Russian government with knowledge of the matter told The Moscow Times.

Shoigu was dismissed amid a wave of criminal bribery cases against high-ranking Defense Ministry officials and generals who worked under him — one that continues to this day.

The influential Vorobyov clan, which has close ties to Shoigu, is also at great risk. Several high-ranking officials in the Moscow region — where Andrei Vorobyov, the son of Deputy Federation Council Chairman and Shoigu's childhood friend Yuri Vorobyov, is governor — are facing bribery charges.

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In addition, some of Vorobyov's relatives reportedly obtained foreign passports and opposed the invasion of Ukraine, the independent outlet IStories reported in 2022.

Members of Russia's elite have noted Shoigu's diminished standing in state media. Once a regular fixture on major Kremlin-controlled networks, Shoigu has now been sidelined.

His only television interview since his appointment to the Security Council was an interview with a relatively unknown journalist from the Rossia broadcaster, rather than one of the top propagandists.

Shoigu has also clashed with his Security Council predecessor Nikolai Patrushev, who refused to give up his Kremlin office to Shoigu, the independent investigative news outlet Agentstvo reported last week.

Although Shoigu himself is unhappy with his new role, he appears powerless to do anything about it.

He has even submitted his resignation letter to the Kremlin with the date left blank, journalist Andrei Karaulov claimed.

"Everyone can see and everyone understands that Sergei Kuzugetovich is being punished," a Russian government official with a military background told The Moscow Times.

The Russian president has pent-up grievances against his former defense minister, three sources who know Shoigu and Putin personally told The Moscow Times.

"The failure of the first days of the war, 'Kyiv in four days,' the mess in the army, the lack of quality encrypted army communications, the uniforms shortage, the scandal with Prigozhin, who aired all the army's dirty laundry in public: All of it was a humiliation. Putin does not forgive humiliation like this. But he doesn't like to rush things," one source said.

"Shoigu can hardly feel completely safe. He is, as far as I know, deeply worried. He has not been impacted yet, but no one can say what will happen next. I wouldn't be surprised if it comes to arrest," another official said.

Even if Shoigu has not yet tendered his resignation, that does not mean his standing is secure, Russian political analyst Alexander Kynev wrote on his Telegram channel.

According to Kynev, the problems in both the Moscow region administration and with Tsalikov's appointment to the Federation Council are real — and if there are problems that are visible, then there are likely more problems hidden behind the scenes.

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