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Briefing

# SEDYUKOV'S FALL PUTS RUSSIA'S MILITARY REFORM UNDER THREAT

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The reasons for the sudden dismissal of Russian Defense Minister Anatoliy Serdyukov remain uncertain. Russian President Vladimir Putin insists that he dismissed Serdyukov due to allegations of widespread corruption in the Defense Ministry. However, there is another possible reason for Serdyukov's fall: The successes he achieved in reforming Russia's military antagonized much of Russia's military establishment.

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# Sedyukov's Fall Puts Russia's Military Reform Under Threat

By Richard Weitz

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Sergei Shoigu officially [took over as Russia's new defense minister](#) yesterday, but the reasons for the sudden dismissal of his predecessor, Anatoliy Serdyukov, remain uncertain.

Russian President Vladimir Putin insists that he dismissed Serdyukov to allow authorities to investigate allegations of widespread corruption in the Defense Ministry. Serdyukov, who has cracked down on corruption within the armed forces, is accused of allowing his key subordinates and family members to enrich themselves in more sophisticated ways, such as by selling off valuable Defense Ministry properties at below market prices to friendly buyers in return for kickbacks.

But Russian and Western media reports indicate that family estrangement and political intrigue may be the main reasons for Serdyukov's ouster. There seems to have been a personal falling out between Serdyukov and other powerful Russian leaders, including Viktor Zubkov, chairman of Gazprom and a key Putin ally who is also the father of Serdyukov's wife. The couple has recently been estranged, and Serdyukov has allegedly begun an affair with an influential subordinate who is under investigation for corruption.

However, there is yet a third deeper reason for Serdyukov's downfall: Although Serdyukov and the Russian political leadership have worked in harmony [to achieve some successes in reforming Russia's military](#), they came at the cost of antagonizing much of Russia's officer corps and military establishment. It might be that Putin, newly concerned about his popularity in the military and elsewhere, decided to sacrifice his defense minister now that Serdyukov had fulfilled his function of smashing the old Soviet-era establishment.

Serdyukov's surprise appointment in February 2007 as Russia's first civilian defense minister reflected the Kremlin's hope that someone who had not risen through the ranks of the country's military-industrial complex would be more willing [to tackle defense inefficiencies and corruption](#). After fulfilling his obligatory compulsory military service in his youth, Serdyukov left the military to pursue a business career that, possibly through Zubkov's patronage, eventually brought him into the government's tax service.

The Russian military's poor performance during the August 2008 Georgia War created an opening for Serdyukov and his colleagues to undertake more radical reforms to address other fundamental flaws within the Defense Ministry. Exploiting the sense of disappointment and concern that followed the war, Serdyukov broadened his military reform efforts from focusing on corruption and procurement to a more comprehensive campaign to restructure the entire Russian armed forces. Since he believed he needed to destroy the existing structure to create a new one, Serdyukov's reform efforts provoked widespread opposition and unease among Russia's military leadership.

A core goal was to transition the Soviet-era military, created to fight a global war with the West, into a force optimized to win local conflicts and counterinsurgencies. This transformation from a mass-mobilization army to a smaller, better-trained and more-effective force on a permanent combat-readiness footing required gutting the number of officers and units. The previous system

of large but undermanned divisions and regiments was replaced with a more flexible brigade structure. Some 40,000 officers have been forced out since 2008, and the number of coveted active-duty general officer posts has been cut from 1,107 to 610.

For the first few years, Serdyukov led the reform charge largely alone, with Russia's political leaders largely staying in the background, leaving Serdyukov to face harsh criticisms for the unavoidable disruptions caused by the reforms. Alienated military officers and experts denounced Serdyukov's lack of military command experience, his refusal to listen to military advice and his penchant for appointing young women he had worked with in the Tax Ministry to senior Defense Ministry positions whose rank was equivalent to two- and three-star generals.

But during his election campaign for president earlier this year, Putin expressed strong support for the controversial military reform program, arguing that Russia had no other choice. "Had we decided not to change anything, and limited ourselves to gradual and partial reforms," [he wrote](#), "we could have sooner or later lost our military potential entirely. We could have lost the armed forces as a viable organism."

One weakness in the reform program was that it lacked a clear sense of direction. The individual reform initiatives seemed logical, but the overall framework was nebulous. For instance, the Defense Ministry never published a white paper describing Russia's military reforms and their underlying logic and goals.

In recent years, the Center for Analysis of Strategies and Technology, a Russian research institute, has undertaken the admirable job of [documenting the reform process](#), showing the connections between the various initiatives and providing an analytical foundation to understand their purpose and results.

But some of the core reform elements have suffered setbacks. For example, the Defense Ministry has reversed course on the professionalization of the armed forces: Shortly before being replaced, Serdyukov confirmed that the ministry would have to retain conscription indefinitely, since the government could not afford to exclusively employ more-expensive professional soldiers serving under contract. Conscripts serve only 12 months, which limits their training and effectiveness.

It remains unclear if Shoigu has the mixture of commitment, arrogance and disdain for the Russian officer corps that allowed Serdyukov to undertake what some analysts have called the most successful government reform program of the past decade. Shoigu is a popular figure for the terrific job he did in creating and managing for almost two decades Russia's Ministry of Emergency Situations. He received the rank of army general due to the ministry's paramilitary functions and capabilities, while cooperating effectively with the Russian military during many crises. But he has not shown any interest or intent to reform the Defense Ministry or challenge the Russian establishment.

Unfortunately, some bad practices have become so ingrained in Russia's defense sector that they could take more than a decade to extirpate. The reforms to date have succeeded in destroying the old structure, which looked like a smaller version of the Soviet armed forces, but they have not clearly created a more effective structure in its place. With Serdyukov's fall, the success of that longer-term project is now in doubt. □

*Richard Weitz is a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute and a World Politics Review senior editor.*

*Photo: Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, December 2008 (photo RIA Novosti, licensed under the [Creative Commons Attribution Share-Alike 3.0 Unported](#) license).*

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