

Military Historians Will Applaud Medvedev

By [Alexander Golts](#)

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President Dmitry Medvedev has held his last meeting with the Defense Ministry collegium in his capacity as president, and I suspect that Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov will not continue long in his post either. Both Medvedev and Serdyukov stated that military reforms are "practically" complete — finally calling the reform process by its proper name and not speaking in euphemisms such as "optimization" and "giving the armed forces a new look." In all sincerity, I believe that those reforms are these two men's single great service to the country and to every Russian citizen.

Medvedev has rarely been the focus of praise during his four years as president. Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's spin doctors jealously reserved all of the accolades for their boss. The liberal public has a long list of grievances with Medvedev over his unfulfilled promises to introduce greater freedoms, battle corruption and modernize the country. Serdyukov's reputation is no better. Any leader of an organization who has fired 200,000 employees cannot, by definition, be especially well-liked. What's more, Serdyukov is clearly reluctant to promote himself and is firm, if not plain rude, with subordinates.

Yet Medvedev and Serdyukov truly deserve the gratitude of the people for implementing the most radical military reforms of the past century. It seems to me that both men understand that the reforms, more than anything else, might earn them an honorable mention in the history books. At their last Defense Ministry collegium, both men rushed to claim the right to be considered reformers. Medvedev noted that "the armed forces personnel and leadership have demonstrated their ability to solve tactical and strategic objectives." The commander-in-chief summed up his remarks by saying: "Overall, as a result of the reform, we have new armed forces that are more up to date and able to respond to potential threats."

The truth is that the reforms indicate that Russia has abandoned the idea of a mass mobilization army and that it no longer plans to defend the country by mobilizing millions of reservists. Reviving that system would be very difficult now that the skeleton units and "excess" officers have been trimmed from the ranks. Perhaps the reformers themselves do not even realize how powerfully they have affected the country's social and political life with their reforms. If the reform process is not stopped midway, it could happen that, for the first time in the 300-year history of Russia's armed forces, military service will become a profession and not an onerous burden. There is thus reason to believe that historians one day will be unable to ignore the military reforms of 2008-11 and approve of the role Medvedev and Serdyukov played in the process.

Of course, Medvedev and Serdyukov were somewhat premature in announcing that the reforms had been completed. True, the purely quantitative side of the process has been accomplished: thousands of excess officers and warrant officers have been dismissed, thousands of nonoperational units have been eliminated and brigades have been formed in place of divisions. It was very difficult work, but the results can be measured in quantitative terms. Now another part of the reform process begins, one that could last for many years — namely, the cultivation and training of new and educated officers who are able to think for themselves and take initiative when needed, as well as a corps of professional sergeants that can maintain discipline in the barracks. The tumultuous and stressful phase has ended, and an extended period of hard work has begun. What's more, it is entirely possible that if the political and economic situation worsens, the country's leaders will be unable to continue military reforms.

This gives rise to the main question: Would it be possible to transform the army back into its former Soviet design? I suspect so. The more the recent reforms advanced, the more they ran up against unreformed state institutions — primarily the defense industry, which should supply the armed forces with modern equipment. During his meeting with the Defense Ministry collegium, Medvedev once again gave strict orders to punish "bad" officials who hindered the fulfillment of defense contracts.

In fact, everyone connected with the defense industry understands that the system is perfect at bilking the government but terrible at producing modern weaponry. Although those same people understand what needs to be done to improve the system, the national leader who created it also continues to control it — and he couldn't care less whether it works. After all, President-elect Vladimir Putin will never admit that he and his close friend Sergei Ivanov — a former defense minister and now head of the presidential administration — created an ineffective system for overseeing the military-industrial complex. It is even possible that

once Putin returns as president and realizes that the system he created does not work, he will try to reverse the reform process. The process of creating a new officer corps could run up against even greater problems. Will the well-educated and enterprising officers agree to become indentured servants who work in a system in which job security and promotions are based not on job performance but on the whims of superiors and closed-door decision-making? The bigger question is whether the government will find the political willpower to change the current system of military service, when doing so would mean eventually losing the ability to order officers to blindly carry out any order — even those that contradict the best interests of the people.

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