

Shoigu Says NATO and Terrorism Russia's Top Challenges

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Terrorism and NATO's expansion at Russia's borders are the country's two main security threats, Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu said Saturday, hinting at a renewal of the armed forces' strategic and doctrinal direction after years of failed reforms.

During an interview broadcasted on Rossia 1, Shoigu cited Syria, Afghanistan, Mali and Libya as "hot spots" of international terrorism, a threat Russia also faces domestically.

The minister's declaration comes one week after President Vladimir Putin introduced prison terms of up to 10 years for training to engage in terrorist activity, and made terrorists' family members liable for the damage incurred by terrorist attacks.

The Russian government has faced increasing pressure to tackle domestic terrorism following a suicide bombing in the southern city of Volgograd that claimed the lives of six people on Oct. 21 and in the run-up to the Sochi Olympics, which will be held near the volatile regions

of Chechnya and Dagestan.

Apart from Russia's concern over terrorist attacks, Shoigu's comments also highlighted apprehensions about NATO's expansion and its increasing influence beyond the country's borders, just several days after NATO hosted its biggest military exercises in seven years in the Baltic countries.

"The continued expansion of NATO, in our view, is absolutely unwarranted," Shoigu said.

Russia's uneasiness over NATO's expansion resulted in Zapad-2013, a large-scale joint military exercise with Belarus held on Russia's border with the Baltic states in September. More than 13,000 servicemen, 250 combat vehicles and 60 aircraft were deployed in a display of military might that Estonian President Toomas Hendrik Ilves said was meant to simulate "conquering the Baltic states."

Alexei Mukhin, the general director of the Moscow-based Center for Political Information, said Shoigu's statements about the country's biggest threats were accurate.

"I completely agree with the security threats outlined by Shoigu," Mukhin said by phone, adding that "Shoigu's declaration gives the military an orientation."

During the televised interview, Shoigu also confirmed that with the enrollment of 60,000 servicemen in the past year, the Russian army's 2013 recruitment objectives had been surpassed.

"Our territory is too large to maintain a full professional army," Shoigu said. "We need to be able to mobilize, and therefore need mobilization resources."

Military service in Russia, which currently is compulsory for males aged 18 to 27, facilitates the defense minister's stated objective of ensuring the army's rapid, full-combat response capacity.

Shoigu was appointed as defense minister in November 2012 after Putin dismissed Anatoly Serdyukov over the selling of the ministry's assets at below-market prices through Oboronservis, a state-run defense holding company.

While Serdyukov launched many military reforms during his tenure as defense minister, his initiatives were tarnished by corruption and a lack of transparency.

Shoigu's first year as defense minister — during which he strove to "decommercialize" the military apparatus — has increased the level of trust among senior officials and within the armed forces, according to Mukhin.

Under Shoigu, Russia has also renewed its military presence in the Mediterranean and pushed towards expanding its presence in the Arctic, assuaging the country's injured pride about its power and grandeur.

Russia is also proceeding with its 23 trillion rubles (\$704 billion) commitment to modernize its weaponry over the next decade, despite a worldwide trend of reducing defense spending.

Even with signs of a renewed strategic outlook, Mukhin warned that the overhaul of Russia's military under Shoigu remains at an embryonic stage.

"I think it is too early to assess Shoigu's achievements," Mukhin said. "We need to see more results before we can really judge his performance."

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