

Russian Officials Voice Bewilderment After Defense Minister's Surprise Ouster

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Former Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and Vladimir Putin. **Sergei Karpukhin / TASS**

Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu's dismissal has come as a shock to many in Russia's political and military leadership, current and former officials as well as sources close to the Kremlin and the Defense Ministry have told *The Moscow Times*.

All of these sources spoke on condition of anonymity in order to speak freely about a sensitive and politically charged subject.

Most of the current and former officials who spoke to *The Moscow Times* described feelings of surprise and bewilderment upon learning that Shoigu, President Vladimir Putin's loyal defense minister since 2012, had been dismissed.

Some also voiced concerns that the reshuffle could jeopardize Russia's invasion of Ukraine at a time when the military is regaining momentum on the battlefield.

The Kremlin had decided to remove Shoigu as early as last summer following the Wagner mercenary group's mutiny against Russia's military leadership, a source close to the Kremlin said.

"The military simply doesn't like Shoigu," the source said.

Although the Wagner mutiny signaled the beginning of the end for Shoigu, most of The Moscow Times' sources said his replacement with Andrei Belousov — a former deputy prime minister and economist with no military experience — came as "a great surprise verging on shock."

"Caligula appointed his horse as a senator. In our case, we could have Putin's Labrador appointed as defense minister," said a current government official, referring to one of Putin's dogs, a Labrador named Koni.

"This appointment does not make logical sense. I've already seen 20 versions explaining why Belousov is a good defense minister. But it's all complete nonsense," the government official said.

"Andrei Removich [Belousov] is fully a theorist. He had little to do with the actual economy. And as for the mobilization economy, where they are now trying to explain that he has to set up something new ... it's complete bulls***," the source said.

Another source close to the Defense Ministry echoed this view.

"Auditing processes in the Defense Ministry is blatant nonsense. That's what the Accounts Chamber is there for. And then [they said] it was 'necessary' to remove Shoigu from the military-industrial complex," the source close to the Defense Ministry said.

As head of the Security Council, Shoigu has been [tasked](#) with overseeing the military-industrial complex.

"If this is not a deliberate decision to worsen the chances of success in the special military operation, one can only assume that the military-industrial complex is the new point of economic growth," the source said, describing Belousov as a Keynesian who favors government economic intervention.

"And those who say the special military operation is here for the long term are right," the source added.

Some sources, however, called Putin's choice of Belousov to head the Defense Ministry as a logical and expected move to optimize military spending as the Kremlin recognizes the likelihood of a long-term conflict in Ukraine.

A current Russian government official drew parallels between Belousov and Shoigu's predecessor Anatoly Serdyukov, who reformed and modernized the Russian army between 2007 and 2012.

"This is Serdyukov No. 2, only more educated and smarter," the official said.

“Belousov's task will be to optimize spending on the war, so that as much money as possible goes to the war and to the killing of Ukrainians, not into the pockets of Defense Ministry officials,” the official said.

“He is an apologist for stimulating the economy with money, state investment, and a planned economy. He is super-loyal to Putin and obsessed with administration and he can be trusted with this role. He doesn't have his own team. He is not affiliated with anyone,” the official added.

A former senior Kremlin official described Belousov's appointment as “a step toward qualified supervision of the army's economy.”

Two sources close to the Defense Ministry and one close to the Kremlin told The Moscow Times that the decision to dismiss Shoigu was “expected and understandable.”

“Funding tended to mysteriously disappear in most Defense Ministry-linked structures,” one of the sources close to the Defense Ministry said, referring to the widespread [corruption](#) within the Russian military.

A government official who used to work in the intelligence services and has hawkish views said he feared that appointing a civilian minister — and the possible reforms that would come with it — could throw a wrench into the war effort.

“So the Defense Ministry will go along the lines of a civilian ministry — [improving] transparency and so on,” the government official said. “But what reforms will there be now? Let's not reform [a system that] is currently taking another village in Ukraine. It's not going to work. It will break everything.”

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