

Resilience Strained: How Civil-Military Relations Are Shaping Russia's War Effort

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The shocks to Russian civil-military relations amid the Russia-Ukraine war started in the first days of the invasion in February-March 2022 and have kept rolling with the partial mobilization in September 2022, Yevgeny Prigozhin's mutiny in June 2023, and, most recently, the reshuffle and arrests at the Defense Ministry and General Staff in May 2024. On the one hand, Russian civil-military relations have demonstrated remarkable resilience; on the other, the sheer number and scale of the shocks highlight that the Kremlin is struggling to preempt destabilizing events that could threaten Russia's war effort and even domestic political stability.

In my previous [memo](#), I argued that the root cause of Russia's failures in Ukraine lies in the civil-military sphere. In this memo, I trace two key features shaping Russian civil-military relations during the war: leadership and formal institutions. Both have been severely shaken up over nearly three years of war. Their final, postwar status is likely to change further, driven by setbacks on the battlefield or dynamics inside the government, or a combination of both. Nonetheless, Russia remains highly capable of absorbing the damage from and responding to unexpected shocks, yet its institutional setup is poorly designed to prevent these events.

Civil-Military Leadership under Shoigu and Belousov: Continuities and Changes

The role of leaders is highly important in Russian civil-military relations. The Russian minister of defense (RUMOD), the chief of the general staff (CGS), and the president are the three key individuals in the military realm. I have [described](#) the prewar dynamics of this troika, whose efficacy strongly depended on pragmatic and trusting relationships.

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During the first two full years of Russia's wartime civil-military relations, RUMOD Sergei Shoigu and CGS Valery Gerasimov were subjected to unprecedented criticism from the Russian pro-war community. Yevgeny Prigozhin, who at the time headed the Wagner Group private military company (PMC), exploited Shoigu's failures in his struggle for power (and money) in the Russian political system. When RUMOD issued a decree mandating the incorporation of volunteer formations into Defense Ministry command and control structures, it became clear that President Vladimir Putin had decided to end the conflict between Prigozhin and Shoigu, siding with the latter. Prigozhin overreacted, starting a mutiny, and ultimately failed – without a single politician or general openly supporting it – and Prigozhin was killed a few months later, in August 2023. Despite these unprecedentedly tumultuous events, Russian domestic politics and civilian control over military forces remained stable.

In May 2024, Sergei Shoigu was replaced by Andrei Belousov as RUMOD. Unlike Shoigu, Belousov comes from a privileged family of Soviet economists and KGB officials. He defended his Ph.D. in economics back in 1988 and held positions in academia and policymaking before his appointment as RUMOD. He brings substantial policy experience, having worked across the entire Russian government starting in the 1990s, including developing strategic plans and advising Putin on economic matters. Belousov is said to have coordinated military logistics, including for Prigozhin's Wagner Group, between the president, Defense Ministry, and wider government. By contrast, Shoigu, besides a very brief stint as governor of Moscow Region, had for most of his life served in a managerial and commanding role at Russia's Emergency Situations Ministry, which earned him the pejorative nickname "fire fairy" (*pozharник*) among military officials.

Unlike Shoigu, Belousov was never a politician, and his appointment as RUMOD came as a surprise. From the outset, he came across as different from his predecessor, wearing a civilian suit and avoiding unnecessary media attention. His underscored civilian persona itself represents a major change for the Russian military, which, prior to the war, was historically reluctant to civilians running the Defense Ministry.

In the first months of his tenure, Belousov made several symbolic decisions that were positively received by the Russian pro-military community. In his appointment speech, he famously said, "One may make mistakes, but lying is prohibited." His first two trips abroad were to Russia's critical military partners: China and Belarus. Belousov also met with military reporters and bloggers to discuss their views on the problems in the military. He later coheaded a meeting with Putin's aide Alexei Dyumin (ex-special operations) on cross-government coordination to develop and produce unmanned aerial systems (UAS), reportedly resulting in a jump in UAS deliveries to 4,000 a day. Belousov also threatened a defense contractor with criminal charges for failing to meet deadlines.

It is too early to expect Belousov to announce a substantial policy program, although he has already outlined four factors for a Russian victory in Ukraine. The first three are not new, having been mentioned by his predecessor: (1) production and delivery of modern

weapons; (2) new tactics with integrated drones; and (3) an effective command and control system supported by AI. This is all the more unsurprising since weapons production, including drones, and AI will be a focus of the 2025-2034 State Armament Program (GPV) currently being finalized.

The fourth factor named by Belousov, however, marked a change: The need to improve the training and education of commanders, by which he alluded to shortcomings in Russia's military higher education system (MHES). Recall that Shoigu had halted the civilian-driven reform of the MHES during his first months as RUMOD back in 2012. It was the worst possible decision for the Russian military at the time, because the reform (launched by Shoigu's predecessor, Anatoly Serdyukov) was being implemented poorly, without proper stakeholder engagement and with heavy short-term material and human resource costs. Thus, by putting military academies back under the service commands, Shoigu left the whole MHES frozen in a half-deconstructed state.

A key factor missing from Belousov's announcement is monitoring and evaluation (M&E) mechanisms, which determine the quality and availability of data on the Russian armed forces available to the RUMOD, the president and his prime minister. Russia's poor M&E mechanisms have ultimately reinforced the personalistic and overly centralized nature of civil-military relations, contributing to poor battlefield performance and thus Prigozhin's conflict with the Defense Ministry. Much still depends on individuals, as evidenced by the dismissal and prosecution on various corruption charges of the team around Shoigu, which is intended to break its power.

Defense Ministry Purges and New Faces Reflect Scale of Problems, Scant Alternatives

At the time of this writing, at least 18 high-ranking officials and officers have been dismissed or remanded, or both. Most of them were involved in defense procurement and property management. A number of commanding generals were also dismissed or put under arrest, such as the commander of the 58th Army, Ivan Popov, the head of the Main Directorate of Communications and deputy CGS, Vadim Shamarin, and the former commander of the 20th Army, Sukhrab Ahmedov. Gone are Shoigu's information policy adviser Andrei Ilnitsky, aide General Alexander Burachenok, press secretary Rossiyana Markovskaya, and chief of staff Yuri Sadovenko, as well as State Secretary Nikolai Pankov.

The removal of Pankov, along with Deputy RUMOD Tatyana Shevtsova and head of the Main Personnel Directorate (GUK) Yuri Kuznetsov, may have the most significant impact on Russian civil-military relations. Pankov, a four-star general (2004) with a background in the Federal Security Service (FSB), had served in the armed forces since 2001, in particular, heading the GUK (2001-2005), the human resource department and watchdog of the Russian military. Thanks to this background, Pankov knew the intricacies of the Defense Ministry and its military leadership. He served under three RUMODs and ended his career as the Defense Ministry's point man for intergovernmental agreements and

relations with state corporations. Shevtsova was a rather legendary appointee of Serdyukov, who had brought her to the Defense Ministry from the Federal Tax Service in 2010. She oversaw the Defense Ministry's budget and finances, and remained on the job even after Serdyukov was accused of corruption. She was regarded as effective, skillfully navigating the planning process for the growing defense budget and delivering satisfactory defense budget performance. Finally, Kuznetsov, after being transferred to head the GUK from the General Staff 8th Directorate (responsible for guarding information and cybersecurity) in 2023, having served 13 years there, oversaw cadres and made decisions on promotions in the Defense Ministry.

Putin's relative Anna Tsivileva, who is licensed medical doctor and was previously worked in the private sector, has replaced Pankov as state secretary. Former Deputy Finance Minister Leonid Gornin took over for Shevtsova, while the top post at the GUK has yet to be filled. Meanwhile, former GUK chief Viktor Goremykin, another longtime FSB official in the Defense Ministry, continues to serve as head of the Main Military-Political Directorate (GVPU). It is unclear how effective Goremykin is at the GVPU, which is supposed to instill loyalty to the government within the military, since Shoigu's aide Ilnitky specialized in information operations and most political indoctrination still comes from state-sponsored media and education; nonetheless, Goremykin appears to be a trusted source of information for Putin and the FSB on the armed forces and, in particular, its personnel dynamics. In addition, Pavel Fradkov has been put in charge of managing military property, having previously served as a first deputy chief of staff of the Presidential Administration. Fradkov graduated from the FSB Academy and is the youngest son of Mikhail Fradkov, a former prime minister (2004-2007) and head of the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR; 2007-2016).

Although Belousov will have to make more appointments, the trend is already clear: Putin is making the leadership of the Defense Ministry more civilian and personalistic than before. In 2000-2007, he had delegated that task to his KGB colleague Sergei Ivanov and the military top brass; in 2007-2012, RUMOD Serdyukov was given a free hand to carry out reforms; and from 2012, Shoigu managed the Defense Ministry as his own company with the military as a key shareholder. Both RUMOD Belousov and State Secretary Tsivileva are said to have direct access to Putin, while the appointment of a former high-ranking Finance Ministry official (Gornin) and son of an ex-prime minister (P. Fradkov) to manage military finances and property, respectively, indicates both Putin's recognition of the problems at the Defense Ministry, as well as the shrinking pool of reliable policy professionals as alternatives.

The role of the CGS will be crucial, however. Immediately after Belousov's appointment, Putin stated that he had no plans to reshuffle the General Staff, only for high-ranking generals to be subsequently dismissed and targeted in criminal cases. Will Putin choose a new military partner for Belousov? The RUMOD still needs time to bring in better cadres to the Defense Ministry, grasp the sheer volume of structural problems facing the military, and finalize the draft 2025-2034 GPV, besides finding a suitable alternative to Gerasimov.

Indeed, without changes at the General Staff, Belousov's mission is doomed: the military can effectively defend its institutional autonomy by manipulating monitored information and slowing down the implementation of Belousov's decisions.

Deluge of Amendments and Laws Reshape Russian Civil-Military Institutions

To make up for the initial troop losses on the battlefield, the Russian government, including the Defense Ministry, and the parliament have introduced multiple amendments to Russian laws. Since partial military mobilization in September 2022, Russia has replenished its armed forces by mobilizing hundreds of thousands of volunteers, contract soldiers, and convicts and raising the maximum conscription age from 27 to 30, while imposing severe penalties—including potential loss of citizenship—for failure to register at military recruitment offices.

Federal Law No. 272 (2022) allowed for all Russian private companies to participate in state defense contracts, mandating fulfillment of defense orders and allowing state agencies to adjust procurement processes as needed. Special economic measures were also introduced, such as resource mobilization (to supply more raw materials), labor adjustments (to push labor into the defense sector), and special working conditions (mandatory overtime, night shifts, and weekend work and cancellation of annual leave), with penalties like the suspension of shareholder rights for noncompliance and increased oversight to minimize corruption. Private companies in certain industries, like drones, industrial gases, and IT, are reportedly seeing substantial expansion. The market for industrial gases, particularly oxygen, argon, and nitrogen, has been boosted by long-term defense contracts and the Defense Ministry's need for medical oxygen. The IT sector is also benefiting from defense orders to enhance secure communications infrastructure, particularly through the revitalization of tropospheric radio communications systems.

One of the most unprecedented developments in civil-military relations was Federal Law No. 419 (2022), which institutionalized voluntary military formations (now overseen by the Defense Ministry), allowing civilians to join the armed forces through contracts signed during mobilization or wartime. Volunteers had fought alongside government forces before, for example in Chechnya, but they were never integrated into the Defense Ministry's official recruitment, supply, and command and control structures. The same practice was spread to the National Guard (Rosgvardiya) by Federal Law No. 639 a year later (2023). Another practice unseen since World War II was the recruitment of men serving sentences in prison, enacted by federal laws No. 270 (2023) and No. 61 (2024). Within about a year after the invasion, the Russian military had transitioned from a semiprofessional force to a mix of volunteers, mobilized men, convicts, mercenaries, and contract soldiers.

Paradoxically, this development actually undermined discipline and willingness to tolerate leadership failures in the military. In 2024, however, the government responded with Federal Law No. 231 that redefined disciplinary offenses for servicemen, such as

violating conduct rules or disclosing sensitive information, with punishments determined by commanding officers.

In view of Prigozhin's mutiny, Federal Law No. 446 (2023) reequipped Rosgvardiya with heavy equipment, including tanks. Symbolically, the last time the Internal Troops (Rosgvardiya's predecessor) received tanks was in 1989, two years before the collapse of the Soviet Union and five years before those tanks were deployed in Chechnya.

The institutional changes in Russian civil-military relations reflect a balance between meeting frontline needs and mitigating the political risks associated with that. On the one hand, the Russian military's resilience to bottom-up institutional change, even under extreme conditions such as the current war, is remarkable. It is arguably easier for the government to overhaul civilian economic and political institutions than to reform internal military rules and processes. On the other hand, there is implosive potential if civilian leaders prove entirely inept at navigating the Defense Ministry, in which case the military might cease to exist as an organized force, as we saw in the summer of 2022.

Conclusion: Civil-Military Relations Swinging from Shock to Sharp Reaction

Despite strong appearances, such as Russia's methodical advance in Ukraine and relatively high numbers of soldiers, a critical look reveals a steady rise in extraordinary policies, unprecedented in Russia's post-Soviet history. The intensification of repressive and disciplinary measures, along with the mobilization economy, provides the government with more tools to keep the Russian military and society under control. From this perspective, however, Russian civil-military relations look like a pendulum, swinging from shock to government response and back again. The initial invasion was a shock, forcing the government to respond by announcing mobilization and changing Russian legal norms; Prigozhin's rebellion came as another shock, to which the government responded with a new set of changes, including replacing the leadership at the Defense Ministry a year later.

Western observers should not take the outward stability of Russia for granted. Putin's personification of control over the military, together with the military's stubborn resistance to internal reforms, could multiply the effects of another destabilizing event, threatening Russia's war effort and even domestic political stability.