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RUSSIA: GRU chief's dismissal opens door to reform

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On April 24, long-standing military intelligence chief General Valentin Korabelnikov was removed from his position. Korabelnikov's future had been in question for months. The removal of such a high-profile critic of defence reform clears the way for further progress, but also leaves his agency vulnerable to power grabs from potential rivals in the security sector.

Analysis

The 63-year-old General Valentin Korabelnikov has technically retired, but in practice he submitted his resignation when it was made clear that the alternative was outright dismissal. He retains his full pension, receives the Order of Service to the Fatherland -- albeit only third class -- and has been offered a sinecure as an adviser to the chief of the General Staff. While his departure opens opportunities for military reformers, it also leaves a gap in the Russian high command that will be hard to fill.

Increasing inconvenience. Korabelnikov was a veteran of the Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU) of the General Staff, the Soviet and then Russian military intelligence agency for which he had worked since 1974. He had been the GRU's director since 1997, and acquired a reputation for forcefulness in dealing with his peers, masters and subordinates alike, mastery of detail and an aggressive approach to operations. He played a particularly important role in managing Chechnya. However, of late he had become increasingly inconvenient to the military and political leadership, and rumours of his possible departure had been circulating since the start of the year:

- *Reform opponent.* He was an increasingly open critic of the reform programme being developed by Defence Minister Anatoly Serdyukov and Chief of the General Staff Nikolai Makarov (see RUSSIA: Accident underscores need for military reform - November 10, 2008). In February, he threatened to resign over proposed personnel cuts; this was only one in a series of such threats, which his subordinates freely leaked to the media.
- *Kadyrov factor.* Korabelnikov had been an outspoken early supporter of Chechnya's President Ramzan Kadyrov, championing granting him free rein to combat Chechen rebels. While this arguably did much to destroy any unified resistance -- allowing Moscow to claim on April 16 that the counter-terrorist operation in the republic was over (see RUSSIA: Rift emerges between Kadyrov and the Kremlin - April 16, 2009) - it may have come at the price of giving Kadyrov near-autonomy in Chechnya. Kadyrov also turned against the GRU's other allies in the region, including the Yamadayev family. This called into question Korabelnikov's mastery of Chechen affairs, which until 2008 had been considered one of his strengths.

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- *Performance in Georgia.* The GRU's performance in the 2008 war against Georgia was mixed. Pre-invasion intelligence was adequate, but added little to the assessments provided by the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR). Tactical intelligence during the conflict was gathered by remote-piloted vehicles and special forces ('spetsnaz'), but while both were effective (see RUSSIA/GEORGIA: Military buoyed by victory in Georgia - August 15, 2008), the GRU ended up bearing most of the blame for delays in passing information on to the regular military.
- *Perceived ineffectiveness.* The GRU maintains a global network of agents, but in recent years questions have arisen about the quality of its work and the utility of its intelligence products. With President Dmitry Medvedev prioritising political and economic espionage, and a series of reversals in the former Soviet Union (a region which is seen as a particular GRU priority), Korabelnikov was increasingly regarded as having lost his edge.

Immediate challenges. The new GRU director, Lieutenant-General Aleksandr Shlyakhturov, has spent his whole career within the agency. This could serve him well as he attempts to deal with two pressing challenges:

- *Establishing authority.* Korabelnikov had not only become the face of the GRU to the high command, but had also become an iconic figure within it. He was often blunt, belligerent and a bully, but at the same time had a reputation as a 'soldier's soldier' with an eye for detail and fierce loyalty to his subordinates. Shlyakhturov has been in the shadow of his larger-than-life former commander, and needs both to establish his own independent authority and to hold together an agency dismayed by Korabelnikov's dismissal. This will be especially important given the probable imminent departure of the GRU's chief of staff, Lieutenant-General Nikolai Kostechko.
- *Rival claims.* The GRU's present political weakness has left it vulnerable to power grabs by rival agencies. One of the most important assets of the GRU is its military space reconnaissance directorate, but the SVR has begun floating the idea that this should be transferred to its control. The SVR is using the problems during the Georgian invasion as its justification, claiming that were the GRU to concentrate on battlefield intelligence, then the problems it experienced would not have arisen. Conversely, the Ground Forces are lobbying Makarov to transfer the spetsnaz forces to their own command, arguing that the GRU should concentrate on strategic intelligence rather than operating on the battlefield.

Prospects for reform. It is likely that the GRU faces reform in the near future, and this may tie in to wider military restructuring:

- *GRU's future.* The GRU will not disappear, but it is unlikely that it will retain its anomalous current situation, in which it is both a federal body in its own right and formally a subdivision of the General Staff apparatus. The GRU will be subordinated more directly to the chief of the General Staff.

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- *Spetsnaz reshuffle?* At present, the GRU controls a force of some 15,000 spetsnaz tasked with a wide range of duties. They operate as both commando strike forces and intelligence-gathering scouts, but there is a distinction between most units, which are manned by a mix of professionals and conscripts, and truly elite volunteer forces. The former are presently assigned to local Ground Forces commands but technically under GRU control, but will probably be transferred to regional commands. However, a small cadre of specialists will remain under GRU control, tasked with counter-terrorist and counter-insurgency operations, deep reconnaissance and wartime sabotage missions.
- *Shifting priorities.* These reforms will reflect a general refocusing of the GRU's operations, which often duplicate the SVR's general political and economic intelligence-gathering. Whether or not the GRU retains its satellite system -- and as Shlyakhturov's background was in strategic intelligence, he has a personal stake in this -- it will concentrate on its core missions. These are strategic military intelligence (largely using its networks of agents and military attaches), battlefield tactical intelligence and maintaining oversight over developments in the CIS.

Building consensus? While Korabelnikov's actual power within the high command was limited, his authority was considerable and his character was such that Makarov and Serdyukov were wary of arousing his anger. While Shlyakhturov ought not to be considered pliant, those who know him characterise him as more of a consensus-builder and a realist. While he will defend the GRU's specific interests, he is unlikely to follow Korabelnikov's lead in resisting reform across the board.

Conclusion

Korabelnikov's ouster leaves the GRU weaker and likely to be reduced in role and staffing, but this is not likely to hurt Russian intelligence operations. Instead, it may expedite the wider process of military reform.

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