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Ivanov's Failure Reveals the Limits of Spin

By Konstantin Sonin

The 2008 presidential campaign hasn't even begun, but the first casualties are already being carted off the field in stretchers. The horrific hazing of Andrei Sychyov, who was beaten by senior servicemen at the Chelyabinsk Armor Academy last month to such an extent that his legs and his genitals had to be amputated, has brought the military to the forefront of public attention. The Sychyov case has also put an end to Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov's presidential ambitions.

Ivanov wasn't knocked out of the race because he wielded less influence over the media than his competitors. Quite the opposite. Ivanov is out because he wasn't up to the job.

Paradoxical as it might sound, Ivanov's aspirations were dashed not by harsh criticism in the media, but by its absence. Back in September 2003, for example, Ivanov announced that reform of the armed forces was all but complete. It was a ludicrous statement, of course, because significant transformation of the military had not even begun at that time.

In the heyday of press freedom in the 1990s under President Boris Yeltsin, Ivanov's statement would have made the evening news on all the major television stations. In those days even stations supportive of the Yeltsin administration covered every gaffe and slip of the tongue made by the president, not to mention government ministers and State Duma deputies. Ivanov, by contrast, was led to believe that he could declare a job done which he hadn't even started.

By January 2006 Ivanov had been defense minister longer than any of his predecessors since Marshal Dmitry Ustinov, who was Soviet defense minister from 1976 to 1984. In his five years in charge of the Defense Ministry, Ivanov has made no progress on military reform despite a unique combination of favorable circumstances: a budget surplus fueled by sky-high oil prices; a large corps of officers with experience of successful combat operations; and strong public support for reform. Military reform programs are far more often launched in the wake of a painful defeat and accompanied by a generally negative public opinion of the armed forces.

Russia's historic opportunity has not been entirely squandered, however. The government still has an abundance of funds to bankroll the transformation to an all-volunteer army, and public support for military reform has only increased since Ivanov took office. The next defense minister will face three main challenges: to present a clear and viable program for the shift to an all-volunteer army; to use the current budget surplus to fund golden handshakes for a significant portion of the military's top brass; and to bring the epidemic of hazing under control.

What lessons can other politicians learn from Ivanov's experience? First and foremost, they should realize that the absence of frank debate in the media has a serious downside. Like Ivanov, top officials run the risk of not becoming aware of their own incompetence until the whole country knows, at which time nothing can be done to salvage their reputation. The defense minister's follies make clear that PR can be used to paper over minor difficulties, but not major failures.

Finally, our leaders should learn that in politics -- even the less-than-democratic form of politics practiced in this country -- if you're going to talk the talk, you also have to walk the walk. At the end of the day actions speak louder than words. The fate of the officials in charge of implementing President Vladimir Putin's high-priority "national projects" program, for example, will depend not on spin doctors and journalists, but on their ability to deliver results. The challenges facing First Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, who has been placed in charge of the program, will have to wait for a future column.

Konstantin Sonin is a professor at the New Economic School/CEFIR.