

Russia Backtracks on Statement About Assad's Fall

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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The  **Moscow Times**

Russia issued a clumsy denial Friday of a statement from its point man on Syria, who said a day earlier that Syrian President Bashar Assad is losing control of the country. The Foreign Ministry insisted that it was not changing its stance on the embattled Syrian regime.

Russia's explanation — that the official was characterizing the opinion of the Syrian opposition rather than stating Russia's position — did not jibe with the words of Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov, who was quoted by all three leading Russian news agencies as saying Thursday that "there is a trend for the government to progressively lose control over an increasing part of the territory," adding that "an opposition victory can't be excluded."

The Foreign Ministry insisted in a statement Friday that Bogdanov was referring only to the claims of the "Syrian opposition and its foreign sponsors forecasting their quick victory over the regime in Damascus."

"In that context, Bogdanov again confirmed Russia's principled stance that a political settlement in Syria has no alternative," the ministry's spokesman, Alexander Lukashevich, said in the statement.

Bogdanov was speaking before the Public Chamber, a Kremlin advisory body. His statement marked the first official acknowledgment from Moscow that Assad's regime may fall.

It was certain to have been seen as a betrayal by the Syrian ruler, further eroding his grip on power amid opposition successes on the ground and recognition of the Syrian opposition by the United States and other world powers.

On Friday, European Union leaders planned to express strong support for a recently formed coalition of opposition groups but to stop short of calling on member states to offer diplomatic recognition.

While Bogdanov's statement seemed to signal Russia's attempt to begin positioning itself for Assad's eventual defeat, the Foreign Ministry's backtracking on that clearly indicated that Moscow has no intention yet of withdrawing support from its ally.

This was reinforced by Syrian Deputy Prime Minister Qadri Jamil, who was in Moscow on Friday to meet with Bogdanov and his boss, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov.

"There have been no changes in Russia's position," Jamil told journalists after the meeting. "Russia stands for dialogue and against foreign interference."

Bogdanov's comments were quoted verbatim by state-owned Russian news agencies RIA-Novosti and Itar-Tass and also by Interfax. The Foreign Ministry on Thursday turned down the AP's interview request.

Facing questions about Bogdanov's statement during a briefing later Friday, Lukashevich insisted that there had been no shift in the Russian position on Syria. He said Moscow was continuing to call for a political dialogue between the Syrian government and the opposition on the basis of the agreement reached at an international conference in Geneva in June.

"Our only goal is to end the violence in Syria as quickly as possible, start a dialogue between the Syrians, between the government and the opposition, and work out a formula for advancing a political process," Lukashevich said. "There hasn't been and there won't be any retraction from our principled line on the Syrian affairs."

Russia maintains a naval base at the Syrian port of Tartus. The base serves Russian Navy ships on missions to the Mediterranean and hosts an unspecified number of military personnel. Russia also has an unspecified number of military advisers teaching Syrians how to use Russian weapons, which make up the bulk of Syrian arsenals.

Syria is Russia's last remaining ally in the Middle East and has been a major customer of Soviet and Russian weapons industries for the last four decades, acquiring billions of dollars' worth of combat jets, helicopters, missiles, armored vehicles and other military gear.

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