

Russia Signals to Assad to Stay Silent on Re-election

By [The Moscow Times](#)

December 19, 2013

The  **Moscow Times**

A Russian diplomat signaled Thursday that Syrian President Bashar Assad should refrain from statements suggesting that he might seek re-election because it could fuel tension before planned peace talks.

Russia has been Assad's most important international ally during Syria's civil war, but the remarks by Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov to Interfax appeared to be a rare public criticism of Assad by Moscow.

Assad told Syria's Al Mayadeen television in October that he had no intention of quitting, despite pressure to do so from the U.S. and rebels fighting government forces. He also saw no obstacles to being nominated for a new term.

"Such rhetorical statements affect the atmosphere and do not make the situation any calmer," Bogdanov said.

Looking ahead to an international peace conference on Syria planned for next month in Geneva, he said: "Our position is that ahead of the start of negotiations, there should be no remarks that could displease anyone or provoke emotions and a response. They should rather be avoided."

Bogdanov has been involved in preparations for the peace talks that are due to start in Geneva on Jan. 22.

Russia has blocked Western-backed efforts to condemn Assad at the United Nations Security Council or to push him out of power. Moscow says that it is not trying to prop up Assad but that his departure cannot be a precondition for peace moves.

As plans for the Syria peace talks move forward, the scheme agreed upon by Russia and the U.S. to destroy Syria's chemical arms is also progressing, with Russia beginning to airlift armored trucks to Syria to transport its chemical weapons for destruction at sea.

Russian transport planes have completed 10 flights to the Syrian port of Latakia and more deliveries are planned before the end of the year, Russian Ambassador to Syria Azamat Kulmukhametov said, Itar-Tass reported Wednesday.

Under a multinational plan approved by the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, or OPCW, to destroy Syria's chemical weapons by June, Russia is providing trucks and other equipment to carry toxic agents from 12 sites around the country to the seaport of Latakia.

Danish and Norwegian ships will then pick up the chemicals — including mustard gas and sarin — and transport them to Italy, where they will be transferred to a U.S. ship for destruction at sea.

The plan has already seen a series of delays, partly due to a lack of security in the country ravaged by civil war, OPCW head Ahmet Üzümcü told the organization's executive council on Tuesday, The New York Times reported.

Chemical weapons shipments, hazardous under any circumstances, become particularly dangerous during a war, and Russian armored trucks and other equipment, along with thousands of special containers provided by the U.S., are all part of an attempt to reduce risks.

Russia has offered to provide security in Latakia and Syria's territorial waters during the operation, said Vasily Titushkin, a Russian deputy envoy to the OPCW, Itar-Tass reported.

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