

# Rogozin Rubs Elbows With Assad in Damascus

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May 26, 2014



Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin (right) on a meeting with Syrian President Bashar Assad.

While all eyes were on Ukraine with its presidential election in full swing over the weekend, Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin paid a visit to Syrian President Bashar Assad to express Moscow's confidence in "the full legitimacy" of the upcoming vote in the war-torn nation.

Rogozin told reporters after his meeting with Assad in Damascus on Saturday that Russia had no doubts about the fairness of the upcoming election — set for June 3 — and dismissed Western arguments of Assad being a tyrant as "the typical speculation Western countries have been resorting to lately" in an interview with Kommersant published Monday.

The comments come in stark contrast with statements made by Russian leaders on Ukraine's recent presidential elections, the legitimacy of which some have made no secret of finding hard to swallow.

State Duma Speaker Sergei Naryshkin referred to the elections as "the lesser of two evils" in comments to *Rossia 24* earlier this month, while Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov described them as "unusual" since they were occurring against the backdrop of "the Army using force against a portion of its population."

The main goal of Rogozin's Damascus visit was "to give some legitimacy to Syria's upcoming elections," though taking a swipe at the West may have been an underlying motive, according to Alexander Shumilin, director of the Center for the Analysis of Middle East Conflicts with the Institute for U.S. and Canadian Studies.

"They could have had the meeting somewhere else; in fact they probably should have, in Moscow, for instance. ... But they held it there specifically to demonstrate how strong Moscow's support for Assad is ahead of the upcoming elections," Shumilin said.

The meeting was held days after Russia and China vetoed a resolution in the United Nations Security Council to refer the Syrian crisis to the International Criminal Court for investigation of possible war crimes. That veto was Russia's fourth since the conflict started as many years ago.

Rogozin told *Kommersant* that Assad had been grateful for Russia's support in the matter, and that he had even opened Saturday's meeting by thanking Russia for its constant support in the UN Security Council.

"The fourth veto by Russia in the UN Security Council saved not only Syria but all of the Middle East from the hegemony of the West. Russia's role on the world arena has become bigger," Assad said, *Vesti* reported.

The Syrian conflict has claimed about 160,000 lives, according to estimates provided by an activist group to *The Associated Press*.

Assad is running in the upcoming election against two other candidates, but is expected to win a third consecutive seven-year mandate. Activists have cast doubt over the upcoming election, noting that it is taking place against the backdrop of full-blown civil war.

When asked by reporters on Saturday why Russia was supporting Syria's election but not Ukraine's, Rogozin said: "Ukraine's presidential elections are a result of a coup d'etat, whereas Syria's are a result of the nation's constitution," *Vesti* reported.

Shumilin said that while such logic may be perplexing for some, "it does not really matter to Moscow whether or not it makes sense; they just need to paint a certain picture. ... They did not really bother with the details, there is no sense to it."

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Original url:

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