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Russia Says Syria's Assad Is Popular, Likely to Win Re-Election

By Bloomberg

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Bashar al-Assad / Kremlin.ru

Russia described Syrian President Bashar al-Assad as a popular leader who has every chance to win re-election, welcoming a thaw in ties between his once-pariah regime and Arab nations.

"He's fairly popular, if he wasn't, the results of the last few years would have been different," President Vladimir Putin's envoy to the Middle East, Mikhail Bogdanov, said in an interview in Moscow this week. "Of course, I think so," he added, when asked whether the Syrian leader can triumph in the next presidential vote.

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Work is scheduled to start early next year on a new constitution for Syria ahead of UN-

supervised elections. Assad won a presidential term in 2014 that will end in 2021. After almost seven years of civil war, the Syrian government is stepping up control of the country, with the planned withdrawal of U.S. forces expected to hand back a key oil-rich region to the central authorities.

Russia expects the Arab League, which suspended Syria's membership in 2011, to readmit the country, said Bogdanov, who is also deputy foreign minister.

"Many Arab countries have understood that this decision wasn't thought through and even counterproductive," he said. "It's very important for the Syrians and Arabs to re-establish ties."

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