

M. Bogdanov's resignation in RF's foreign policy general agenda

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Abstract

ARVAK analyzes the resignation of the Deputy Foreign Minister of the Russian Federation and the President's Special Envoy for the Middle East and Africa Mikhail Bogdanov on July 9, 2025. Despite the official version of a “personal nature”, the suddenness and lack of a prepared replacement indicate a political background to the decision. The commentary claims that Bogdanov's resignation is a consequence of a comprehensive failure of Russian diplomacy in the “Southern strategic direction”, including the loss of influence in Libya, Egypt, Syria, a reduced role in the Palestinian-Israeli settlement, and a crisis in relations with Armenia and Azerbaijan. It is emphasized that Russia's previous successes in the region were due primarily to military force, and not to the effectiveness of diplomacy, which squandered accumulated assets due to “poor risk forecasting” and a “deficit of toughness”, as well as the use of the outdated principle of “demonstrative equidistance”. In conclusion, the question is raised: is Bogdanov's resignation only a symbolic punishment of the “sole culprit” or will it mark the beginning of a fundamental reorganization of the entire Russian MFA, including its methodology and leadership.

Keywords: *Bogdanov's resignation, RF MFA, Russian diplomacy, Russian foreign policy, Middle East, Africa, South Caucasus, Russian-Armenian relations, Russian-Azerbaijani relations, Nagorno-Karabakh, principles of Russian diplomacy, strategic miscalculations of the Russian Federation, reorganization of the Russian Foreign Ministry.*

1. Analysis of personnel decisions and its context

On July 9, 2025, Russian President Vladimir Putin signed two decrees, one of which dismissed Mikhail Bogdanov from his position of Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, and the second – from the duties of the Russian leader's Special Envoy for the Middle East and African countries. Immediately after this decision, sources in the Russian Foreign Ministry said that M. Bogdanov submitted his resignation “of his own free will”, “solely for personal reasons”.

However, according to Russian media, this narrative raises questions, since in January 2025, V. Putin extended M. Bogdanov's term of state service until March 2, 2026. This is a significant indicator: it is unlikely that a high-ranking diplomat overseeing such a significant area in the presidential administration and the Russian Foreign Ministry would be relieved of two positions just 8 months before the end of his term without serious grounds. Also noteworthy is the lack of a pre-prepared replacement at the time of M. Bogdanov's resignation and the consideration of several candidates in the Kremlin and the RF MFA. These technical details indicate that M. Bogdanov's resignation is more likely of political than “personal” character.

¹ The original (in Rus.) was posted on our website on 13.07.2025.

2. Assessment of the situation in the “Southern strategic direction” of the RF

In addition to personnel *nuances*, attention must be paid to the current situation in those areas of the foreign policy and diplomacy for which the now former Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs was responsible. And this situation can hardly be called favorable for the RF.

While Russia has achieved certain successes on the African continent, namely – in the establishment of a political, economic and military presence in the Sahel Region in parallel with the weakening of French influence there, the situation in the Maghreb countries and the Middle East has become extremely unfavorable for Moscow as a whole. The Russian Federation has effectively lost its residual influence in Libya and Egypt, has lost its traditional role as a moderator of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, has lost Syria as a reliable strategic partner, has brought relations with Turkey to a dead end and, despite the signed agreement on a “*strategic partnership*”, it maintains a state of uncertainty in the Iranian track of its policy.

The list can be continued; however, the main failure of the “*Southern*” foreign policy front, which was supervised by M. Bogdanov, was the crisis in Russian relations with Azerbaijan and Armenia. Obviously, this reality has become the last straw that broke the Kremlin's patience. It can be assumed that it was no coincidence that V. Putin's decree was signed on the eve of the meeting between Nikol Pashinyan and Ilham Aliyev in Abu Dhabi.

The recent meeting unequivocally signals Moscow's complete exclusion from the Armenian-Azerbaijani settlement process. The resolution of the so-called “*Zangezur corridor*” issue, now integrated into “*The Middle Way*” – a route bypassing Russia and serving Ankara's pan-Turanian aspirations – is proceeding without consideration for Russia's national interests.

3. Reasons for the degradation of Russian influence in the Middle East

It would hardly be an exaggeration to characterize Moscow's Middle East policy as a “*complex failure*” especially since Russian experts themselves openly talk about it. Russian analytical thought records Moscow's loss of control over global processes that are restructuring the balance of security and interests in a vast and problematic macro-region from the Mediterranean to Afghanistan. According to these experts, back in the early 2020s, official Moscow was absolutely certain that the “*Southern direction*” should be considered the most reliable zone of strategic security of the Russian Federation on the continent, absolutely predictable and controllable. This, among other circumstances, contributed to the Kremlin's decision to focus and act more decisively on the Ukrainian and, in a broad sense, European direction.

However, this confidence largely arose not from the successful actions of Russian diplomacy in the aforementioned vast geopolitical zone, but primarily due to the productive actions of the Russian Armed Forces, which, after the collapse of the USSR, once again indicated their presence in the region. The military campaign to save and strengthen the regime of Bashar al-Assad; the support of the Libyan coalition led by Khalifa Haftar with

weapons and units of Russian PMCs; the establishment of a Mediterranean Russian Navy base in Tartus, Syria; the introduction of the Russian peacekeeping contingent (RPC) in Nagorno-Karabakh – all these actions became a serious bid by Moscow for a qualitatively new return to the league of major global and regional actors. At the same time, Russian energy companies and military-industrial complex enterprises became more active, indicating the prospect of creating strategic ties of the Russian Federation with such significant regional players such as Turkey and Iran. It is enough to recall the “*Turkish Gas Stream*” project; the construction of the “Akkuyu” nuclear power plant within the framework of Turkish-Russian energy cooperation; the contracts to strengthen Ankara’s defense potential with the latest Russian technical achievements in air defense field; the agreement to supply Tehran with modern Russian jet fighters; the programs to expand trans-Caspian trade logistics along the North–South axis, etc. Thus, despite the desire of the collective West to limit Russia’s influence in the region, Moscow has consistently “punched” its way into the Middle East and Africa, combining military force, economic interests, and financial capital.

Russian diplomacy, naturally, was called upon to serve this strategic agenda, coordinate multifaceted work, consolidate successes and look out for new horizons for Russian influence in the “*Southern strategic direction*”. And perhaps it succeeded in this at the first stage of the rapid advancement; however, time has shown that the accumulated assets were devalued as quickly as they were acquired.

The decline of Russian influence in the region presumably coincided with the reorientation of Moscow’s main power activity towards the West. During this period, responsibility for consolidating the successes achieved in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East passed to “*Smolenskaya Square*” – the Russian Foreign Ministry. Despite having significant advantages, the country’s foreign policy tool was unable to provide adequate strategic cover on the southern flank in the context of the escalation of the conflict in Ukraine. Subsequent events showed that, even taking into account the objective difficulties caused by the increased activity of Western powers in the Middle East, Russian diplomacy demonstrated ineffectiveness, rapidly losing its accumulated assets and failing to transform them into a sustainable geopolitical resource.

4. Methodological mistakes and their consequences

According to assessments from independent Russian experts, the primary contributing factors to this degradation of influence were attributed to inadequate risk forecasting and a deficiency in the assertiveness of the diplomatic corps. For instance, overtly hostile and provocative actions, such as the downing of a Russian aircraft on the Turkish-Syrian border in November 2015, leading to the death of pilot O. Peshkov, and the subsequent assassination of Russian Ambassador A. Karlov in Ankara in 2016, are considered indicative of “*Smolenskaya Square’s*” failure to grasp the strategic calculus of the Turkish military-political establishment in its interactions with Russia. These incidents, furthermore, emboldened Ankara to exert consistent and largely unhindered pressure on Moscow concerning both the Syrian and Karabakh questions.

Another critical deficiency in Russian diplomacy is its adherence to the “*demonstrative equidistance*” principle, which has proven obsolete in the current geopolitical landscape. This approach, characterized by maintaining an equal distance from all conflict parties, becomes particularly problematic when one of those parties is an ally or strategic partner of the Russian Federation. A prime illustration of this “complementary policy” is Moscow’s stance toward Iran and Israel. This position directly contradicts Russia’s stated commitments and declared interest in stabilizing and strengthening the Islamic Republic of Iran’s regional standing. This inconsistency likely contributed to Tel Aviv’s confidence in launching a military campaign against Tehran. This campaign, in turn, severely undermined the prospects for political, economic, energy, and military-defense cooperation between Russia and Iran.

Another proof of the failure of such a political and diplomatic approach can be the Armenian-Azerbaijani agenda, in relation to which Moscow has also chosen the “*equidistance*” principle, despite the existence of strategic allied relations with Yerevan both in a bilateral format and within the framework of the CSTO political and defense alliance. There is a misconception, mainly generated by “*Smolenskaya Square*” itself, that the policy of rapprochement with Baku was adopted by Moscow after the political forces oriented towards the West came to power in Armenia in the spring of 2018. Meanwhile, close economic cooperation and interaction in the defense sphere between the RF and AzR began long before that, and the narratives about the need to strengthen political interaction with Baku at the price of Yerevan’s interests were embedded in the new “*Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation*”, signed by V. Putin on November 30, 2016. According to this document, the relations of the Russian Federation with the Republic of Azerbaijan were actually equated to the “*Armenian case*”. Naturally, the authorship of this concept belonged to the MFA of RF, and the direct result of its implementation resulted in the occupation of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, the actual reorientation of Yerevan to the West and the extreme tension currently observed at the moment in Russian-Azerbaijani relations, which marks the final loss of Moscow’s strategic positions in the South Caucasus.

5. Conclusion: Russian MFA reorganisation prospects

The present commentary from the ARVAK Center does not focus on a detailed etiological and consequential analysis of Russia's comprehensive underperformance in the Middle East. Instead, the primary objective is to register the presence of this systemic issue and identify overt indicators of the Kremlin's increasing disquiet with the contemporary regional configuration. The termination of M. Bogdanov’s tenure, from our perspective, could indicate a belated realization and acknowledgement by the Putin administration regarding fundamental strategic errors committed in the “*Southern strategic vector*”. These errors, over many years, remained unaddressed by the Kremlin due to a confluence of objective and/or subjective circumstances.

However, the main question now is whether the Kremlin is content with dismissing only M. Bogdanov? If so, then this will be further evidence of the widespread practice in Russian government circles, of linking a problem exclusively to one person or group of

people, but not to the system as a whole. Or will V. Putin, following the example of D. Trump, resort to a fundamental reorganization of the country's foreign policy instruments, including the MFA, its methodology, strategic concepts and leadership? After all, it is obvious that failures of such a scale, which not only damaged the strategic interests of the Russian Federation in the Middle East, but also created a threat to security directly at its southern borders, could not have been the result of the negligence and irresponsibility of a single official who supervised the said region as a Deputy Minister and, concurrently, was a special representative of the President of the RF. We are most likely talking about a systemic problem of the entire foreign policy structure headed by Sergei Lavrov, whose erroneous actions (or inaction) led to a crisis of Russian influence and control of processes in regions that are strategically important for Russia.

Particular attention is drawn to the Russian media's report on the Kremlin's intention to abandon the long-standing practice of combining the positions of Deputy Foreign Minister for the Middle East and Special Envoy of the President for the same region. This may indicate that V. Putin may no longer rely solely on the Foreign Ministry reports to assess the situation in this critically important geopolitical region for Russia. Instead, he appears to intend to delegate particularly important assignments to diplomats from his own administration, bypassing the MFA nomenclature. This is a serious signal, and it will soon become clear to what extent the Kremlin understands the urgent need to reorganize the top apparatus of "*Smolenskaya Square*" and whether such an understanding exists at all.