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# Hill airman from Moldova excited for chance to vote

By [Deseret News](#)

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Some Americans have never registered to vote, and some who register don't always make it to the voting booth. And yet Hill Air Force Base Airman 1st Class Elena Dulger's face lights up the room when she talks about her first chance to participate in a democratic election.

Dulger, 21, took her oath of citizenship Wednesday, seven years and one day after meeting her father at JFK International Airport in New York. After becoming an official U.S. citizen, Dulger will get her passport, and she plans on registering to vote.

"A lot of people don't realize how important (voting) is," she said. "It is a privilege."

As an American, with her new passport in hand, Dulger will be traveling to Brussels, Belgium, where she will represent the U.S. Air Force in the NATO Chess Championship in August. She just won second place in the 2008 Armed Forces Inter-Service Chess Tournament in Arizona and will now be the first female player to compete in the NATO competition.

Dulger was born and raised in Moldova, a country that was once part of the USSR. Both of her parents were teachers, but teachers there make \$20 to \$30 per month, and often less in small towns, she said.

Dulger's father taught her and her brothers to play chess at an early age. But it never was just a way to pass the time. It was a way "to jump over that Iron Curtain." Looking back, Dulger thinks her father had a grand plan for a better life.

It isn't always easy to obtain a visa for work, Dulger said. But a visa to represent Moldova in a competition was a different story. She has competed in France, Spain, Ukraine, Greece and other countries.

She arrived in the United States when she was 14, joining her father and a brother, who had arrived six years earlier. Her mother, who is divorced from her father, only recently immigrated, and another brother remains in Moldova.

In Moldova, poverty was much more than lacking the monetary means for survival. Dulger describes a cultural difference that is so vast it is "like another planet." In her native country, a person could work two jobs and still have a hard time providing for a family. Volunteer work is simply not an option.

"You are so into trying to take care of your family that you don't have time for it," she said.

Dulger said the average life expectancy in Moldova is 50-60 years. In contrast, she stands amazed in a country where people can return to school to get a second degree and start a whole new life at 50.

Even education is entirely different, with options available here that are not even career fields in Moldova.

"You don't have to be what anyone expects you to be," Dulger said. "You can be anything you want to be."

That wasn't an easy choice for Dulger. She had gone through high school and enrolled in college. But she dropped her classes before the term had even begun.

"I wanted to do everything but was passionate about nothing," she said. "I didn't want to get a degree that I wasn't passionate about."

Dulger enlisted in the U.S. Air Force two years ago. Immigrants into the United States are allowed to join the military on a temporary basis, under certain restrictions. One is a provision that they become citizens before they are allowed to re-enlist. While military service is required in Moldova, it is an option in the United States — one that also gives her an alternate means of completing her education and a sense of accomplishment.

Becoming a U.S. citizen is something Dulger has waited a long time for. "I can do more," she said. "It opens a lot of doors for me, even in the military."

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## 3 Airmen take spots on all-service chess team

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**SAN ANTONIO (AFPN) --** Three Airmen will be part of a six-person team representing the armed forces in competition at the 19th Annual NATO Chess Championship Aug. 4 through 8 in Brussels, Belgium.

Master Sgt. Dan Ranario, Tech. Sgt. Robert Bucholtz and Airman 1st Class Elena Dulger earned their spot on the all-military team with strong performances in the U.S. Armed Forces annual Interservice Chess Championship June 9 through 13 at Davis-Monthan Air Force Base, Ariz.

The Airmen snatched three of the six spots, with the remaining spots going to the Army, Marine Corps and Navy on the all-service U.S. team.

"I feel very special and privileged to make the cut. Not everybody gets to represent the U.S. chess team," Sergeant Ranario said. "I like the challenge. I consider it a sport."

Sergeant Ranario said he is preparing for the international competition by practicing at home, playing online games and reading chess books.

Sergeant Bucholtz earned his spot on the team with a third place finish at the interservice tournament.

"It is a great honor to be on the U.S. military chess team. I have been playing in the military since 2002 and qualified twice, with one year off due to a deployment," Sergeant Bucholtz said. "I'm thrilled to have made it this far again as the Air Force and interservice level tournaments are extremely competitive, due to the depth of strong players in each. I'm looking forward to making a strong contribution at the NATO Championship -- hopefully the team can take a medal this year."

Airman Dulger took second place with five wins and two losses for the tournament. According to tournament officials, Airman Dulger will be the first woman player for the U.S. Armed Forces Chess Team.

"I just recently got my U.S. citizenship and getting a chance to represent United States Armed Forces Team means a lot to me not only as an enlisted person, but also as an American

citizen," Airman Dulger said. "I am very grateful and honored to be on the team."

This year, the championship brings together the best military chess players from 17 NATO countries.

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