

Georgia Elections Key to NATO Bid

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TBILISI, Georgia — The head of NATO told Georgia on Thursday that parliamentary and presidential elections in the next two years would be an important test of the country's readiness to join the alliance.

NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen, who has championed better ties with Russia since taking office in 2009, told Georgian leaders on a visit to Tbilisi that the offer of membership was open, but stressed the need for further reforms.

NATO promised Georgia eventual membership at a summit in 2008, but the mood cooled after the South Caucasus nation fought a war with Russia later that year.

Rasmussen told Georgia's parliament that next year's parliamentary election and a presidential poll in 2013 would be key tests.

"They will require you to pass a strong electoral code and to ensure a level playing field with equal opportunities for all," he said.

"Georgia has done a lot. The upcoming elections will be an important indicator of just how

strong the democratic institutions are and how ready Georgia is for NATO membership."

Rasmussen said Georgia had taken significant steps in promoting freedom of expression and economic growth and in fighting corruption and reforming its military. He also praised Georgia's support for the NATO mission in Afghanistan.

"You have achieved a lot. Georgia is on the right track and Georgia has come a long way. But you have not yet reached your destination," he said.

Speaking after meeting Georgian Prime Minister Nika Gilauri on Wednesday, Rasmussen said he was not able to say when Georgia could expect to become a member. "That will very much depend on further progress," he said.

Rasmussen's caution reflects a reluctance within the 28-member NATO alliance to antagonize Russia, which is opposed to Georgia joining.

NATO is keen to boost ties with Moscow and has invited Russia to join a NATO missile defense initiative to guard against attacks from states including Iran, which the West suspects of developing nuclear weapons. Iran denies the charge.

Russia has remained cautious, suspecting the offer may be aimed at negating its nuclear deterrent.

Georgia's relations with Russia took a turn for the better on Wednesday, when Moscow signed a Swiss-brokered deal with Tbilisi removing the last big obstacle to Russia joining the World Trade Organization after 18 years of talks.

Georgia had been using its WTO veto to claw back some leverage over Russia, which routed Georgian forces in the war over Moscow-backed breakaway regions three years ago.

Rasmussen said NATO was happy that the WTO deal would allow the presence of international monitors along Georgia's internationally recognized borders.

He said Russia's WTO membership would enhance free trade and was in line with NATO's ambition "to engage Russia in a constructive economic, political and security cooperation."

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