

Georgia Will Not Bow To Russia, Leader Vows

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TBILISI, Georgia — President Mikheil Saakashvili says Georgia will never give up its sovereignty for the sake of good relations with Russia and called on his opponents to declare their foreign policy openly before October's elections.

His comments on Saturday appeared to be a direct challenge to reclusive Georgian billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili, who has said he will contest the elections and has called for good relations with both Moscow and the West.

"Everyone wants to have better relations with Russia, and I want it too, but not at the expense of their own sovereignty, their own statehood," Saakashvili said at a military base in Gori, a few kilometers from South Ossetia, where Russian troops have been stationed since 2008 following a brief war.

Moscow has recognized the region as well as Abkhazia as independent states.

"NATO and the European Union are the only ways to strengthen Georgian statehood for our

future generations," he said at a ceremony to mark the 91st anniversary of Georgia's occupation by the Red Army in 1921.

Saakashvili said Western countries, unlike Russia, looked on Georgia as a partner and not as a "slave."

Saakashvili said his political opponents should explain their foreign policy priorities openly and clearly and not "sit on two chairs at once."

Saakashvili, 44, has faced down popular protests against his rule by opponents who accuse him of curbing freedoms in Georgia.

Political analysts say that as long as the opposition is fragmented, there is little threat to Saakashvili, whose term is due to end in 2013, or to his ruling party.

Ivanishvili has said he will form a party to run in this year's parliamentary elections. Authorities have stripped him of his citizenship on the grounds that he also holds French nationality.

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