

Saakashvili Offers to Quit if Russia Exits Rebel Regions

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TBILISI, Georgia — Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili said he's willing to resign if Russia withdraws its troops from the two separatist Georgian regions that split off in the 2008 war between the two countries.

The regions, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, have declared independence, but that is recognized only by Russia and a handful of other countries. Both depend heavily on Russian economic aid and military support.

Speaking to journalists, Saakashvili reiterated accusations that Russia wants to drive him from power.

He said he would sign an agreement with President Dmitry Medvedev to resign "if Russia is prepared to return to Georgia control of the territory it occupies ... and pull out its troops."

The prospect of Russia withdrawing troops or otherwise diluting its influence in the two regions appears all but nonexistent. In addition, Abkhazia and South Ossetia vehemently

oppose any restoration of Georgian government control.

Animosity between the Kremlin and Saakashvili was already high before the 2008 war, centering on Saakashvili's push to join NATO and take Georgia out of Moscow's sphere of influence. Since the war, Saakashvili has been anathema to Russia.

Medvedev, in an interview broadcast live on national television Thursday, called Saakashvili "an empty spot, he is zero. Sooner or later he will go into political history, and we are prepared to form relations with any other leader of the country that appears, restore diplomatic relations, go as far as they are prepared to go."

Deputy Georgian Foreign Minister Nino Kalandadze expressed regret that Medvedev "is speaking in a form that's inappropriate for him and using an unsuitable lexicon."

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