

Georgia Eyes Payback From Russia for WTO Deal

By [The Moscow Times](#)

November 13, 2012



Zurab Abashidze, Georgia's special envoy to Russia, speaking during an interview at his Tbilisi office Monday. **David Mdzinarishvili**

TBILISI, Georgia — Georgia's new government wants Russia to rebuild trade ties and expects Moscow to reward Tbilisi for a deal that allowed its neighbor to join the World Trade Organization, the Georgian special envoy to Russia said in an interview.

"Georgia gave its consent for Russia's entry into the WTO, which was not an easy decision, but there have been no positive steps from Moscow so far," Zurab Abashidze said Monday. "We expect such steps."

Russia achieved WTO accession in August after 18 years of negotiations.

Abashidze, appointed this month by Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili, also suggested that Georgia's decision on whether to compete in the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi would depend

on whether relations improve.

Ivanishvili is keen to be seen as forceful in his dealings with Russia, where he made much of his estimated \$6.4 billion fortune. He worked hard during his election campaign before an Oct. 1 vote to deflect accusations that he is a Kremlin stooge.

Abashidze said Ivanishvili's statement last month that Georgia should participate at Sochi, up the Black Sea coast from Georgia, did not amount to a final decision to compete.

"It's a positive signal to Moscow, but it does not mean that Georgia is ready to compete in the Olympics in Russia," he said. "We need to clarify the political picture before making such a decision."

Lawmakers led by Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili, the former prime minister, whose final term as president ends next year, had considered calling on other nations to boycott the Sochi Games, seen as the personal project of President Vladimir Putin. The games have cost millions of dollars in infrastructure investment.

Ivanishvili's coalition victory ended Saakashvili's nine-year political dominance in Georgia, a focus of tensions between Russia and the West and a transit point for energy exports to Europe.

The billionaire tycoon has pledged to prioritize relations with the West, following in U.S. ally Saakashvili's footsteps.

He also says he wants to improve ties with Moscow, which were badly damaged by a five-day war in 2008 that followed strains over Saakashvili's efforts to bring Georgia into NATO. The country was in Moscow's thrall for nearly two centuries before the 1991 Soviet collapse.

At the same time, he wants to avoid appearing to accept Moscow's control over Abkhazia and South Ossetia, two breakaway Georgian regions that Russia recognized as independent states after routing Georgian forces in the war in August 2008.

"I think we can start talking and solving problems that are not behind so-called 'red lines,' such as recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia," Abashidze said.

One issue for discussion that he cited was Russia's 2006 ban on Georgian wine, mineral water and other products. Georgian wine and mineral water, popular in Russia since the Soviet era, made up almost a third of total Georgian exports.

Abashidze said cooperation on regional security, particularly the fight against drugs and weapons smuggling, as well as cultural and humanitarian cooperation between the former Soviet republics were also up for discussion.

With Russian forces based in Abkhazia and South Ossetia and Moscow saying the Georgian government should treat the regions as nations, security is fraught.

Abashidze said restoration of diplomatic relations, severed after the war, was not on the agenda for now.

"If Georgia restores diplomatic ties unilaterally, it would mean we are legalizing a reality that was created after the war," he said. "But if our dialogue produces some real and tangible results, this issue may get onto our agenda."

Abashidze said Ivanishvili's visit this week to Brussels, his first foreign trip as prime minister, underscored that relations with the West were the priority.

"We also have our own 'red lines,' such as our sovereignty, territorial integrity and freedom in our foreign relations," Abashidze said.

He said Georgia would be "consistent but principled" in any talks with Moscow.

"We are not going to give up on fundamental issues," he said. "At the same time, we don't want to imitate cooperation and create an illusion of progress."

Abashidze, 61, was ambassador to Russia from 2000 to 2004, a period that coincided with Putin's first term. Most of his tenure as ambassador occurred before Saakashvili came to power in the wake of the 2003 Rose Revolution.

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