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Georgia Won't Use Force With Rebels

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Mikheil Saakashvili speaking to the European Parliament on Tuesday, where he said Georgia needed "strategic patience." **Vincent Kessler**

Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili forswore the use of force against the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia during a speech Tuesday to the European Parliament.

The comments in Strasbourg, broadcast live in Georgian translation by Rustavi-2 television, were previewed in an interview he gave the day before to the newspaper Le Figaro.

"I will take advantage [of the speech] to make a pledge to not use force," Saakashvili said in the interview published on the newspaper's web site.

"This is a controversial initiative because every country, when it is occupied, has the right and even the obligation to fight, including by military means, to defend its sovereignty. But I see things differently."

He added: "Georgia must become a modern, European country. We cannot end up like Afghanistan."

Georgia needs "strategic patience" that may bring about liberation of its territory and a "reconciliation" with Russia, he said.

Russia fought a brief war with Georgia in August 2008 that resulted in the rebel regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia breaking away from Georgia. Russia recognizes both regions as independent, though the international community does not.

Tension between Russia and Georgia has run high since the war. Saakashvili told Reuters in August that, while there was little risk of a new war, Russia still wanted to oust him with forces 50 kilometers from the Georgian capital, Tbilisi.

In the interview, he said Georgia renounced the "use of force against the invader in any situation," adding that he was willing to conduct open talks with Russia "anywhere, with no conditions whatsoever and at any level."

(Bloomberg, Reuters)

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