Saakashvili Meets Parliamentary Vote Winner

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Saakashvili, left, approaching to shake hands with Ivanishvili at the Presidential Palace in Tbilisi on Tuesday. **David Mdzinarishvili**

A Georgian billionaire whose coalition won the country's recent parliamentary elections met with the president Tuesday and pledged his commitment to Georgia's bid to join NATO.

Bidzina Ivanishvili discussed the transition of power with President Mikheil Saakashvili at their first meeting since Ivanishvili's party won the vote in September.

Political opponents Saakashvili and Ivanishvili, the likely new prime minister, will have to work together for the first year of the new government. Under a constitutional reform due to take effect when Saakashvili leaves office in October 2013, many of the president's powers will be transferred to the prime minister.

Ivanishvili, who made his fortune in Russia, has previously stressed the need to restore relations with Moscow, which were severed after the two countries fought a brief war in August 2008.

Nevertheless, he told the media after a closed-door meeting with the president that he remains committed to integration with Europe and good relations with the United States, a pro-Western course that was set by Saakashvili.

"Europe would be our goal, and Georgia will definitely join NATO very soon," he said.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said Tuesday in comments carried by news agencies that he hopes the new Georgian government will establish good relations with the breakaway republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

But he stressed that there could be no discussion on the reintegration of these republics, which declared independence in 2008.

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