

Georgia and Russia to Hold First Bilateral Talks Since War

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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The billionaire prime minister's own hulking glass and metal residence overlooking Georgia's capital, Tbilisi. **Shakh Aivazov**

TBILISI — Russia and Georgia will hold bilateral talks this week, the first since their 2008 war, marking an improvement in ties after the party of Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili, Russia's bitter foe, lost control of parliament in October elections.

Diplomats from Moscow and Tbilisi will meet in Switzerland this week for an "informal meeting mediated by the Swiss," said Zurab Abashidze, a new Georgian envoy tapped by the recently elected government to head ties with Moscow.

Relations between the two former Soviet states remain fraught four years after Russia crushed a Georgian assault on the breakaway region of South Ossetia. Each blames the other for starting the conflict.

Russian President Vladimir Putin, who once threatened to "hang Saakashvili by the balls," has repeatedly said Moscow would never hold talks with him.

Russia welcomed the outcome of the elections, which ended Saakashvili's nine-year dominance and swept to power an opposition coalition led by billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili, who has said he wants to improve relations with Moscow.

But the two sides are at a political stalemate over South Ossetia and another breakaway region, Abkhazia. Russia recognized both as independent states shortly after the war.

Among the issues on the agenda for talks, Abashidze said last month, is reversal of the politically charged Russian ban on imports of Georgian wine, mineral water and other products. Moscow instituted the ban two years before the war.

Georgian wine and mineral water have been popular in Russia since the Soviet era and made up almost a third of total Georgian exports prior to the ban.

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