

Protests Force Saakashvili to Change Speech Venue

By [The Moscow Times](#)

February 10, 2013



A bloodied Saakashvili backer among protesters at the National Library. **Georgi Abdaladze**

TBILISI, Georgia — Hundreds of protesters who accuse Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili of flouting human rights and stifling dissent forced him to change the venue of his annual address to the nation on Friday.

Political tensions have engulfed Georgia since Saakashvili's party lost parliamentary elections in October to a group led by billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili. Now prime minister, Ivanishvili is experiencing a difficult cohabitation with the president.

Scuffles broke out as protesters barred officials from Saakashvili's party from entering the National Library, the venue for the speech that was due later in the day.

Protesters smashed windows and broke doors at the library and threw punches at Saakashvili allies, including the mayor of Tbilisi and a female lawmaker who was left with a nosebleed.

Following the protest, Saakashvili made his annual address from his office and called for his opponents to abandon the rivalry he said risks undermining democracy and unity in the country.

“Now it is time for the new majority to give more to the Georgian people and to continue to build our national home,” Saakashvili said. “It is time for the winners of the elections to build a new floor in our collective home rather than undermining its basement.”

Saakashvili is widely credited for clamping down on corruption and implementing liberal economic reforms during nine years of political dominance in Georgia, but his critics accuse him of concentrating too much power in his hands, committing human rights abuses and stifling dissent.

He was originally due to give the speech in front of the Georgian parliament, but its speaker, an Ivanishvili ally, said earlier this week that the address should be put off, prompting the president to opt for the library instead.

“Worrying that majority blocks President from delivering traditional address to Parliament of Georgia. Mutual respect is key to democracy,” Swedish Foreign Minister Carl Bildt said on Twitter.

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