

NATO Head Urges Georgia to Hold Democratic Presidential Race

By [The Moscow Times](#)

June 27, 2013

The  **Moscow Times**

TBILISI — Georgia must ensure that presidential elections in October satisfy democratic standards, NATO head Anders Fogh Rasmussen told Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili, who is locked in a bitter political dispute with the outgoing president.

Since Ivanishvili took office last year, dozens of former officials linked to President Mikheil Saakashvili have been arrested, triggering warnings from the West that Tbilisi should avoid selective justice or persecution of political opponents.

The presidential vote in Georgia, a pivot of geopolitical rivalry between the West and Russia, will end a year of turbulent cohabitation between the two since Saakashvili must step down after serving two terms.

"To demonstrate that democracy is deep-rooted means also making political cohabitation work, showing a clear commitment to the rule of law and ensuring that the presidential

election this year meets the very highest level," Rasmussen told a news conference with the billionaire Ivanishvili on Wednesday.

Rasmussen also said Georgia, which contributes 1,500 soldiers to the NATO mission in Afghanistan, should continue introducing reforms to eventually meet requirements to join the military alliance.

NATO promised eventual membership to Georgia, a priority for Saakashvili, at a summit in 2008. But the mood cooled after a five-day war Georgia fought with Russia later that year.

"The upcoming presidential election will be much better than any previous election in Georgia," Ivanishvili told the news conference. "It will ... simplify our way towards NATO."

Ivanishvili made most of his fortune, which is worth \$5.3 billion — or more than a third of Georgia's gross domestic product — in Russia. He also wants Georgia to join NATO and the European Union, but has said he would also seek better ties with Russia.

Ivanishvili has dismissed accusations of using courts to settle scores with his political rivals. But he also says any wrongdoing must be treated according to the law.

Georgia's former prime minister has been among the former officials arrested since Ivanishvili rose to power. The officials have been accused of abuse of power, corruption, illegal confinement or illegally obtaining personal information.

Some Ivanishvili supporters protested against alleged vote rigging by the Saakashvili side after last October's parliamentary race, but the president's quick acceptance that his party was going into opposition marked the first smooth transition of power in Georgia.

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