
Kocharian Congratulates Reelected Georgian Leader

By Karine Kalantarian and Ruben Meloyan in Tbilisi
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President Robert Kocharian has "wholeheartedly" congratulated Mikheil Saakashvili on his victory in Georgia's disputed presidential election, his office said on Tuesday.

"I am confident that you will continue reforms aimed at Georgia's stability, democratization and economic development," Kocharian said in a letter sent to Saakashvili late Monday and made available to RFE/RL the next day.

Kocharian also reaffirmed Armenia's commitment to deepening political and economic ties with Georgia. "Peace and development of regional cooperation is the main guarantee of stability in the South Caucasus," he wrote.

Kocharian and Saakashvili have met regularly -- usually in an informal format -- to discuss issues of mutual interest ever since the latter swept to power in 2004 in Georgia's popular "rose revolution." Their most recent talks took place in the Georgian resort city of Batumi and the Armenian ski resort of Tsaghkadzor in September and March 2007 respectively.

Speaking to foreign journalists in Tbilisi on Sunday, Saakashvili described as "excellent" his country's relationships with Armenia as well as Azerbaijan. "Georgia has never been as close to Armenia and Azerbaijan as it has during my presidency, and I think [those ties] will grow even stronger," he said. He also said that Georgia will serve as a "bridge" between its two estranged South Caucasus neighbors.

Kocharian congratulated Saakashvili before the official announcement of the final results of the Georgian presidential election held on Saturday. Its preliminary results showed Saakashvili winning a second term in office with 52 percent of the vote. His nearest rival, Levan Gachechiladze, came in a distant second with about 25 percent.

Western monitors described the ballot as largely democratic, saying that irregularities witnessed by them did not influence the overall outcome. The positive assessment was echoed by the United States, the European Union and NATO.

Georgian opposition leaders, however, reject the official vote results as fraudulent, saying that Saakashvili should at least face a run-off with Gachechiladze. Gachechiladze and his allies marched into the offices of the Central Election Commission in Tbilisi on Tuesday, accusing it of "stealing" as many as 500,000 votes.

Tbilisi-based leaders of Georgia's Armenian community are similarly divided in their evaluation of the election conduct. Van Bayburt, a pro-Saakashvili member of the Georgian parliament, called the vote the most democratic in Georgia's history. "Unfortunately, since 1991 a part of Georgian society has grown used to ousting constitutionally elected presidents," Bayburt told RFE/RL, commenting on the opposition allegations.

But Arnold Stepanian, a community leader who supports another opposition candidate, had a different taken on the Georgian political crisis. "These elections were just as flawed as the ones held before 2004," he said.
