

LAST UPDATED: **SEPTEMBER 17, 2008, 14:00 • TBILISI**

Strengthening Georgia's Democracy Is the Most Powerful Response to Russia, says President Saakashvili in State of the Nation Address

“Our best protection lies not in the arms that we wield, but in the ideas and values that guide our people,” President tells NATO ambassadors; lays out “new wave” of reforms

In his annual state of the nation address, President Saakashvili laid out a series of bold reforms to reinforce Georgian democracy in the aftermath of Russia's invasion and partial occupation of the country. "We have to respond to the Russian aggression, which is aimed at destroying our nation of rapidly developing democracy. This response must be even more democracy, even more rapid development. Democracy is the best means to protect our country," Saakashvili said.

The President said he was ready to cooperate with the oppositions "as never before" in implementing the "new wave" of democratic reforms. He echoed the democracy theme in an address Monday to members of the North Atlantic Council, who were on their first official visit to Georgia.

"Our best protection lies not in the arms that we wield, but in the ideas and values that guide our governments and our people," Saakashvili told the assembled NATO ambassadors. "Georgia's ability to withstand the Russian onslaught is equally rooted in our relationship with our friends and partners in the West—and in particular with NATO."

In his remarks on Monday, the President underscored his support for an international investigation into the origins of the war. On August 17, at a press conference with German Chancellor Angela Merkel, Saakashvili was the first person to call for such an inquiry.

"This was not a war of our choosing, nor of our initiation," he said. "Indisputable evidence is now entering the public domain, evidence that sets the record straight on just who the aggressor was in this unfortunate tragedy." On Monday, the Government released radio intercepts from the morning of August 7 bearing witness to the movement of Russian forces into Georgia before any military action was taken by Tbilisi. The President also welcomed a Parliamentary inquiry into the circumstances that led to the Russian invasion.

In his address to the North Atlantic Council, the President expressed Georgia's sincere gratitude for NATO's support after the invasion. "In the darkest hours of the Russian invasion and occupation, when Tbilisi itself was under threat, the Alliance spoke with the clearest conviction in support of Georgia," he said. "We have been deeply moved by the flow of humanitarian and economic aid, the pledges of future support, and the constant flow of leaders who have come to Tbilisi to stand side by side with the Georgian people.

Meanwhile, in detailing the Government's new reform agenda, Saakashvili noted that pluralism in Georgia already had made strides since January's Presidential election. Among other improvements, the threshold for entry to Parliament was lowered to 5 percent, leading to a rise in the number of parties in the legislative body. Also, opposition representation in parliamentary committees and oversight bodies has increased.

The President laid out a sweeping set of democratic reforms for the coming months, including:

- An increase in state financing for opposition parties, as well as the establishment of a foundation to finance political research and polling for opposition parties and NGOs.
- Greater opposition representation in the "Trust Group" that oversees the defense ministry, thus allowing the opposition more control over the ministry's budget.
- The establishment of a national "Anti-Crisis Group" with broad opposition participation to oversee reconstruction efforts.
- Simplification of procedures to hold a no confidence vote in Parliament; by contrast, dissolution of Parliament by the President will become more complex.
- Appointment of opposition members to the National Telecommunications, the government watchdog for the industry.
- Free and equal access of all political parties to airtime on political debates hosted by public television.

Reforms to make the courts more independent also were announced, including the election of opposition members to the Justice Council, the body that nominates judges and oversees judicial procedures; the introduction of trial by jury; and the appointment of judges for life tenure.