

INTERNATIONAL  
**Herald Tribune**

## Georgian president gets boost from Bush toward NATO membership

**The Associated Press**

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### WASHINGTON:

U.S. President George W. Bush assured Georgia's president Mikhail Saakashvili on Wednesday that he will press for Georgia inclusion in a NATO membership track at the alliance's summit next month.

Bush also called for a peaceful resolution of differences with Georgia's two breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Though Bush has been a strong booster of Georgia's NATO hopes, he may not be able to offer Saakashvili more than encouragement when he attends the summit being held April 2-4 in Bucharest, Romania.

Georgia's chances of joining a program that would prepare it for eventual membership will hinge on winning unanimous support of the 26 member countries. Some Western leaders, including German Chancellor Angela Merkel, have misgivings about moving Georgia a step closer to membership.

Bush will be looking to persuade the NATO allies, but his prospects are unclear.

"I believe that NATO benefits with a Georgia membership, I believe Georgia benefits from being a part of NATO," Bush said at a joint appearance with Saakashvili after a White House meeting.

Russia has opposed NATO's eastward expansion and seems particularly angered about the prospect of membership for Georgia and Ukraine. The leaders of both former Soviet republics have annoyed Moscow by turning toward the West.

"I have to thank you, Mr. President, for your unwavering support for our freedom, for our democracy, for our territorial sovereignty and for protecting Georgia's borders and for Georgia's NATO aspirations," Saakashvili told Bush.

The boost for Saakashvili's NATO aspirations comes only months after the United States and other Western countries criticized Georgia for a brutal police crackdown Nov. 7 against an opposition rally in Tbilisi. After the violence, Saakashvili called an early presidential vote to ease tensions, and the United States has praised the elections. Opposition leaders have accused Saakashvili of stealing the Jan. 5 presidential election in which he was re-elected with just over half of the vote.

On Wednesday, about 1,500 opponents of Saakashvili held a demonstration outside the U.S. Embassy in Tbilisi.

"We are demanding that the United States stop supporting Saakashvili, who is an illegitimate president," opposition leader Levan Gachechiladze said. "The United States must see Georgia not just as an important territory from the point of view of geopolitics, but a country that strives to build democratic society and must have free elections."

The small nation lies on a key export route for Caspian Sea oil exports to the West, contributing to its role in a struggle for regional sway between Russia and the United States.

Since Saakashvili was first elected in 2004, the 40-year-old U.S.-educated lawyer has helped transform Georgia into a country with a growing economy and aspirations of joining the European Union as well as NATO.

He has been a staunch ally of the United States. On Wednesday, Bush thanked him for the contingent of 2,000 troops currently serving in Iraq.

"The citizens of Georgia must know that the troops that have been provided there are brave, courageous professionals, and have made a significant difference," Bush said.

He also alluded to international concern over Georgia's two breakaway republics.

"We talked about the need for there to be peaceful resolutions of conflicts, while recognizing the