

Saakashvili May Repeat Putin's Gambit

By [Matthew Collin](#)

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President Mikheil Saakashvili addresses the United Nations General Assembly at United Nations headquarters in New York last week. **Henny Ray Abrams**

I will enjoy art, life and new architecture. And I will not care if people don't remember President Saakashvili."

That's what the Georgian president said last week when speculation resurfaced about what he would do when his time in office ends. But while his opponents might relish the image of a happily retired Saakashvili chilling out in the galleries and cafes of Tbilisi, most of them don't see it happening any time soon.

During the summer, lawmakers have been discussing constitutional reforms that could transform Georgia's political system, reducing the powers of the president and making parliament and the prime minister stronger. In recent years, some opposition parties have argued for a less dominant presidency and enhanced parliamentary authority. But now they're also unhappy about the proposed reforms. This is partially because they're worried that the future, turbo-charged prime minister could turn out to be none other than

Saakashvili.

Saakashvili is supposed to step down as president in 2013 after completing the maximum two terms. Many Georgians believe, however, that he won't quit politics altogether. Despite the ruinous war with Russia and the allegations that he's effectively made himself omnipotent in Georgia, he is still the single most popular politician in the country. Some of his supporters argue that a character with such vigor and imagination should not be carelessly discarded.

So will he imitate his enemy, Vladimir Putin, and become prime minister while one of his allies takes on the emasculated presidential role? So far, Saakashvili isn't saying yes. But he isn't saying no either, although he has denied that the constitutional changes are aimed at extending his reign.

He is clear, though, that he wants his cohorts to keep on ruling. "No one should be surprised that I will spare no efforts for the ideology and the reform team which I represent to remain in power after 2013," he said recently.

Although former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher once famously declared she would go "on and on and on," that didn't happen, of course. She was eventually ousted by her own ministers. But unlike with Thatcher, there seems little chance that Saakashvili will become the victim of a "palace coup." Therefore, despite the potentially uncomfortable comparisons with Putin, the choice about whether to take another tilt at power is likely to remain his alone.

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