

Russian Authorities Scoff as Saakashvili Named Odessa Region Governor

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Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko and newly-appointed governor Mikheil Saakashvili greet fans in Odessa.

The appointment of former Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili as the head of Ukraine's Odessa region Saturday was met with skepticism by Russian officials, who have a long history of deriding the pro-Western figure.

Saakashvili has been among Russia's harshest critics over its annexation of Crimea last year and its alleged role in supporting the pro-Russian rebels of eastern Ukraine. The former Georgian leader, who ruled the country from 2004 to 2013, is credited with having spearheaded sweeping pro-Western reforms. Georgia's relations with Russia were tense during his presidency, reaching their nadir in the summer of 2008 during the Russian-Georgian war over the breakaway republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Ukraine's President Petro Poroshenko said in a statement Saturday that he had granted

Saakashvili Ukrainian citizenship and appointed him to head the Odessa region of southern Ukraine. The Ukrainian president said Saakashvili was a "great friend of Ukraine" and expressed the hope he would crack down on corruption, ensure the population's safety and attract foreign investors to the Odessa region.

Saakashvili, who was charged last year in absentia in Georgia with abuse of power, has often been ridiculed by Russian officials and state media outlets. After Saakashvili was caught chewing his tie on camera in an apparent case of the jitters ahead of an interview with the BBC in 2008, Russia's state-run media pounced on the incident to report that the Georgian president was mentally unstable and unfit to lead a country.

Officials in Moscow were quick to disparage Saakashvili on Saturday and mocked Ukraine for employing a former world leader in self-imposed exile.

"Saakashvili is the head of the Odessa region. The circus continues. Poor Ukraine," Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev wrote Saturday on Twitter.

Alexei Pushkov, leader of the State Duma's foreign affairs committee, said that Saakashvili's appointment demonstrated that the former Georgian president had forgotten his pledge to one day lead his country again.

"At best, Saakashvili can lead a column of prisoners in Georgia," Pushkov wrote via Twitter on Saturday, referring to the prosecution the ex-leader would face were he to return to his home country.

The Russian Foreign Ministry's special representative on human rights, Konstantin Dolgov, predicted Saturday that Saakashvili would cause a "fiasco" in the Odessa region.

Current Georgian President Giorgi Margvelashvili castigated his predecessor for having relinquished his Georgian citizenship to become a regional Ukrainian governor, telling the Interfax news agency on Sunday that Saakashvili had "insulted the country and the institution of the presidency." Neither Georgia nor Ukraine recognize dual citizenship.

Saakashvili fled Georgia after his second presidential term expired in 2013. He denies the accusations made against him in his home country, claiming they are politically motivated.

Saakashvili, who has headed Ukraine's Advisory International Council of Reforms since February, told the RIA Novosti news agency Saturday of his desire to turn Odessa, one of the largest cities in 19th-century imperial Russia, into a Black Sea coast hub.

"It is important for me to get started because turning [the city of] Odessa into the capital of the Black Sea [region] will be a very long process," Saakashvili said, RIA Novosti reported. "But there is no other city in the ... region that could compete with this marvelous metropolis in terms of its potential."

Saakashvili is replacing businessman Ihor Palytsia, named to the position last May after more than 40 people, most of them pro-Russian sympathizers, died in a fire in Odessa during a confrontation with pro-European demonstrators.

Critics of Saakashvili's appointment hung ties scrawled with the words "For Misha" (a diminutive of his first name) throughout the city of Odessa, alluding to the infamous tie-chewing incident, Ukraine's Channel 24 reported Saturday.

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