

United States and its Western Allies Must Do All They Can to Save Saakashvili

There is alarming news coming from Georgia. The conditions of the former President of Georgia, Mikheil Saakashvili's imprisonment are very harsh and his very life is in grave danger. It is imperative that President Joe Biden and the leaders of the free world do everything they can to save the life of this man who worked tirelessly to promote democratic values and resist Russian imperialism.

Mr. Saakashvili has always been a champion of universal human values, a stalwart ally to the West and the United States, and a strong critic of Russian hegemony over the former-Soviet republics. As the third President of Georgia, he led the country through a transformation that in the span of only several years turned Georgia from one of the most into one of the least corrupt countries in the world, as recognized by Transparency International. After only months in power, he was praised by leaders in Europe and the United States for championing democracy and free markets and ending a period of de facto control of his country by organized crime groups.

Recognizing the success of a western-oriented approach and fearing a loss of influence over the former Soviet republics, Vladimir Putin ordered the invasion of Georgia in 2008 and after a brief war, Russia occupied 20% of the country, which it continues to hold to this day. At the time, Saakashvili warned of Putin's imperialist ambitions but few in the West wanted to believe him and did not take his warnings seriously. It is reasonable to believe that if the West had mobilized to stop the imperialist ambitions of Putin, then we would not have to face the barbaric aggression of Russia in Ukraine today.

Saakashvili oversaw the first peaceful electoral change of power in Georgia by ceding power to his political rivals. Saakashvili stepped down as a leader of the country in 2013, in accordance with the constitutional limits the implementation of which he himself had overseen, and respecting the will of the Georgian electorate. Unfortunately, his political rival was a billionaire Russian oligarch who has remained in power behind the scenes in Georgia since 2013. He vengefully sought to prosecute dozens of members of Saakashvili's outgoing government, and swiftly brought a number of politically-motivated charges against Saakashvili himself, upon which the latter was tried and convicted in absentia. Saakashvili is now in detention in Georgia for these purported crimes. According to leading medical experts from around the world, there is a high possibility that Saakashvili has been subjected to torture and possible poisoning at the hands of the Georgian government, which is widely understood to be heavily influenced by the Kremlin.

I first met Saakashvili in 2004. He had recently come to power as Georgia's third President through the peaceful Rose Revolution and was visiting Israel, attempting to strengthen ties between the relatively new independent country and the state of Israel. As a member of the Cabinet, I was asked by my prime minister to meet President Saakashvili at the airport and to accompany him to Jerusalem. We had a fascinating 45-minute conversation during the car ride

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and discussed topics of mutual interest. I told him about my connection with the first president of Georgia, Zviad Gamsakhurdia. I was a founding member of the Moscow Helsinki group, monitoring violations of human rights in the Soviet Union. Gamsakhurdia became the head of the Georgian Helsinki Group, following our example. We met in Moscow in 1976, when I tried to help him to meet foreign journalists. But when we all were arrested in 1977, he was the first to repent and was used by the KGB against his comrades in order to avoid imprisonment. Saakashvili showed extreme interest in this story, as if he was preparing himself for future struggles when he would have to fight for freedom and democracy against totalitarian interests.

At the same time Saakashvili really impressed me with his comments about Iran, which he had recently visited. "It reminds me of the Soviet Union in its last years of existence" he said. And seeing my surprised look he hurried to explain: "Officially everybody curses America, but off the record, everybody admires America." He saw this common double-thinking as the sign of coming change. His understanding of the nature of revolution was very similar to mine. I often quoted his remarks about Iran. Unfortunately, when five years later the people of Iran crossed the line between double-think and dissent and started revolution, the free world let them down. Today, as Ukrainian people are fighting for their freedom against the barbaric aggression of Vladimir Putin, it is critically important that he be stopped. If the United States and its allies let Mikheil Saakashvili die in the coming days in prison it will be a real encouragement to the Russian dictator because Saakashvili was the first leader who stood in the way of his imperialist ambitions.

Mikheil Saakashvili is more than a symbol of Western values; he is a friend of democracy and progress, and the United States and its allies should do everything they can to ensure that his life is saved.

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