



Saakashvili in Odessa

by Nicu Popescu

Odessa has served as a spring board for foreign politicians before. The governor of the region between 1803 and 1814, Armand-Emmanuel du Plessis, Duke of Richelieu, went on to serve as prime minister of France twice. But (temporarily) hosting for a former president is something new.

The appointment of Mikheil Saakashvili – a restless yet error-prone reformer – as governor is a gamble. Much of Ukraine's trade passes through Odessa, the country's fourth-largest city. And following the loss of Crimea and the blocking of Mariupol's access to the sea, Odessa has become even more vital. In both political and economic terms, the Black Sea port city is well placed to become one of Ukraine's powerhouses – or one of its biggest headaches.

The Odessa file

Odessa's role as a gateway into Ukraine is both a blessing and a curse. Although it is rich in resources, the region is believed to be one of the most corrupt in the country. The combination of high levels of trade, bad governance and an unrecognised secessionist territory next door (Transnistria) means there is ample opportunity for smuggling and other illicit activities.

In security terms, Odessa is even more important. Immediately after the annexation of Crimea, maps began to appear of a Russian-supported *Novorossiya*, which depicted an area in Ukraine that

was to secede from Kiev running from Sevastopol to Odessa. Many in Russia expected – and many in Ukraine feared – that this territory would rise up against the post-Yanukovich regime. The secessionist region of Transnistria, where Russian troops are stationed, is only 50km away from Odessa. Should the city ever fall, Ukraine would not only be reduced in size, but also encircled and landlocked.

Saakashvili's critics

Saakashvili's appointment raised many eyebrows. The decision was at first met with indignation by some: how is it possible that Ukraine, a country of 45 million people, could not find someone with enough credibility, competence and integrity to run one of its most important cities? Putin, among many others, leapt on this as an opportunity to criticise Kiev. A geopolitical argument was then raised: as Saakashvili is a hate figure in Moscow, his appointment was met with the accusation that Ukraine was deliberately seeking to provoke Russia.

Then came an inter-communal argument. On 2 May 2014, nearly 50 people died during clashes between pro-Ukrainian and pro-Russian activists, mostly from the latter camp. Although the pro-Russian demonstrators instigated the violence, they were swiftly outnumbered and overrun, and forced to take refuge in a building which was subsequently set on fire. It is not clear whether or not



this was an accident, and the tragedy has yet to be properly investigated. The fear is that Saakashvili might re-open or even deepen the rift which has emerged in the overwhelmingly Russian-speaking city because of the incident.

While these are all genuine concerns, they are ultimately less important than the introduction and pace of sorely-needed reforms. Ukraine's future will be determined by how fast and successfully it can reform, not by who will do it. In any case, the *status quo* is more humiliating and dangerous than any gripes over being governed by a foreigner.

The words and the deeds

True to his style, Saakashvili started his tenure with a populist tornado. He travelled on local public minibuses to neighbouring towns, turned up to prosecutor's meetings to accuse them of corruption, and destroyed the fences of villas which were blocking access to public beaches.

The list goes on: Saakashvili forced out the manager of Ilichevsk's port, as well as its head of customs in a noisy and public fashion. He disbanded the old Soviet-style traffic police and rolled out new units which are to be trained by Californian law-enforcement officials. He also launched an attack on the monopolised air transportation market, and fully opened access to all companies willing to fly to Odessa.

The effects of such symbolic gestures have not been negligible, especially for his first 100 days in office. Local experts claim that law-enforcement officials – from police to prosecutors – have started to think twice about engaging in corruption as brazenly as before and that their sense of immunity has taken a knock. As a result of his actions, in late August, 57% of polled respondents from the Odessa region said they support Saakashvili, and 27% said their opinion of him had improved since his appointment.

The constraints and the opportunities

Unlike in his previous post as president of Georgia, or that of previous governors of Odessa like the Duke of Richelieu, Saakashvili does not have an entirely free hand in running the region.

For a start, he has plenty of enemies both locally and nationally. On a local level, the city's mayor is from Yanukovich's former Party of Regions. More importantly, many of Saakashvili's potential key local appointments to executive functions must be endorsed by – or negotiated in – Kiev, where

various political forces, oligarchs and government bodies also have a say. And whereas some of Saakashvili's appointments went through quickly, like the head of the Odessa's police service (another Georgian), he has met significant resistance for others from forces which are reluctant to relinquish lucrative corrupt customs schemes.

It therefore appears that Saakashvili cannot do his job in Odessa properly without playing an active political role in Kiev as well. This, in part, led to his emergence onto the stage of national politics where he, by and large, has Poroshenko's support (with all the constraints of coalition politics that the president is also subject to).

Saakashvili also backs Poroshenko in his political fights. As part of this arrangement, Saakashvili campaigned in June in Chernihiv for a parliamentary candidate on Poroshenko's list, where he clashed with a close associate of Ihor Kolomoisky's, one of Ukraine's most powerful oligarchs. In early September, he also attacked the government led by Yatsenyuk for failing to conduct reforms and for protecting oligarchic schemes to plunder the state.

Theories and rumours abound. Some think Saakashvili is exerting pressure on the government in an attempt to speed up any of his appointments blocked or delayed by the coalition in Kiev. Customs posts in Odessa in particular are worth fighting for, as they are key to generating the resources needed to improve the region. But others speculate that Saakashvili has his sights set on becoming prime minister himself, and that his forays into national politics are a means to this end.

Either way, Saakashvili is in a bind. On the one hand, it is impossible to pursue reforms without conflict: reform is conflict. On the other hand, reform efforts can be hampered by opening too many fronts. Getting this balance right is a difficult task.

For now, Saakashvili is focused on mobilising public opinion to shake up Ukraine's corrupt system. This strategy of conflict is not without risks, but given the lethargic state of Ukraine's reform dynamic, there are few other alternatives. What is certain is that Saakashvili, along with several other of his countrymen and former subordinates who have come to Ukraine – such as the deputy interior minister or a deputy prosecutor general – are some of the most dynamic reformers in Ukraine.

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