
The scandal in Ukrainian politics with ex-Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili

Isn't it interesting how sometimes decisions are made with a total assurance in their correctness and turning as incredible failures revealing it was the worst option taken? There are numerous political blunders in history of politics and decision-making, however, when it comes to such country as Ukraine, I sometimes have a feeling that its politics is like an ever-lasting total blunder. That is why I chose the topic of the recent scandal in Ukrainian politics concerning ex-Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili, who also was appointed as a governor of Ukraine Odesa region in 2015-2016.

The political background of Mr Saakashvili is pretty impressive. When coming to Ukraine after the Maidan Revolution he was rather welcomed and well-known for his incredible transformation of Georgia from a post-Soviet underdeveloped state to the fast-developing state with friendly relations with the West, deprived of corruption as means of doing politics. It was not a secret that he received support of the US and its advisors in his activity, but Ukrainians after 2014 were certainly West-oriented so had nothing against that. Ex-Georgian President came as a Poroshenko supporter and was even granted the Ukrainian citizenship to become legal governor by the Ukrainian President. Now, what happened that by December 2017 Mr Saakashvili was not only left as a stateless person, but also was wanted by the national police of Ukraine and Georgia?

To explain that I'm applying the rational Actor model at first. So when Petro Poroshenko became a President he was legally elected and promoted path "to the West". On the recommendation of the US he invited Saakashvili (Western support was very important), gave him the Ukrainian citizenship and appointed him to a good position, precisely the Governor of Odesa region (touristic region on the South of Ukraine near the sea). So from 2015 Mr Saakashvili was providing his policy in the region similar to the one he did in Georgia and basically, the idea was "if he could transform Georgia, he could help to do that in Ukraine as well". Saakashvili was rather supported as a new politician although not without suspicion. The obvious question was in whose interest he is playing. At first the people thought that he was in the interest of Poroshenko, others just didn't trust him and thought of him as a "dark horse". So there are two perspectives: Mr President Poroshenko and Mr Saakashvili. The logic of the first one was that he invites Saakashvili, gets the approval from the US, publicly declaring the new government is working towards the democratization and unifying with the West (EU in particular) and Mr Saakashvili can just be there, far from Kyiv, doing good job and not messing around with the president. From the perspective of Mr ex-Georgian President he was given a second

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chance. Being known for a great job in his own country and then being outcasted on own land he had a chance to prove himself one more time. He received the citizenship which granted him a status in Ukraine and of course created an image of “fighter against corruption”. Now the turning point comes when Saakashvili suddenly comes into light and declares that Poroshenko is a thief, liar, even worse than previous criminal president, that he is the head of all corruption in Ukraine and that he (Saakashvili) is from now on a fighter against that.

The context at that time is characterized by enormously high social dissatisfaction with the government (only 5% of population supported Poroshenko) and thus became a perfect environment for growing of such a leader as Saakashvili. With his image he created a figure “which is only one opposition able to stand against the criminal president”. What were the logic and the options of Poroshenko to respond?

1. Saakashvili doesn't get public support, because he is a “dark horse” and people won't trust him enough to follow → Poroshenko can feel safe and then easily shut “the rebel” up and get rid of him without any problems.
2. Saakashvili gets the support of the population and runs for next presidential elections (autumn 2018) in Ukraine with a chance to be elected → Poroshenko has to clean up all his business and make most of his last year + get more support from Western world.
3. Saakashvili plays on his own → no threat, continuing with own business.

Sudden threat of Saakashvili surprises the government and despite assuming that he will not get the support of the people, Poroshenko decides to deprive the opponent of the citizenship meaning that he will not have the legal basis of legal stay in the country.

Now from my point of view all further event and sudden outcomes have only one line of reasoning from the side of Mr Saakashvili. If we think of his position for a minute we will see one clear point standing behind all his activity: he simply has nothing to lose. No matter if there is anyone behind him and he is just a marionette or whether he decided to regain his status and become president in Ukraine, or if he is just another political clown, his logic is absolutely the following: he has nothing to lose. He was abandoned from his own country, he was then abandoned from Ukraine by the President and fled. So from his point of view any of his decisions were rational: to get up again.

He flees and in 2017 threatens president Poroshenko that he will be back to Ukraine with millions of supporters and that he will go from the Polish-Ukrainian border and no one would be able to stop him. The blinder of Mr President, however, was underestimating Saakashvili when his supporters from Western Ukraine literally did carry him through the border and no border

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police dared to prevent them. Understanding his mistake President has to change the strategy and now come up with idea how to get rid of ex-governor. And here the funny part starts: western countries largely dissatisfied with Ukrainian government policies in recent time (precisely the case with anti-corruption committee and not acting in accordance with the agreed course to Europeanization) did not support Poroshenko's measures to arrest Saakashvili and his total deprivation of citizenship, demanding the right of ex-Georgian President to appeal in the court.

Decision-making of Mr Poroshenko becomes even more complicated after unsuccessful arrest of Saakashvili when his supporters literally stopped the national police and took him out of the car. Saakashvili was accused of receiving money for his activities from the criminal gang of the former president who was overthrown with the Maidan Revolution and basically the accusation was not announced until the day in the court. The whole situation looked extremely stupid and Ukrainian politicians could not formulate their ideas, could not (and still cannot) find the evidence of the accusation and thus postponed the Saakashvili case to the new 2018 year.

Now what would have been logical (rational) is to see Poroshenko trying to remain a President till legal elections, Saakashvili proving his "dedication to Ukrainian nation" (as he was singing Ukrainian anthem and shouting Ukrainian slogans to impeach President for the freedom of Ukrainians) and then on the elections Saakashvili would try to run for Presidency. However, the greatest blunder appeared to be at the point when Saakashvili publicly announced that he is not going to run for presidency and only wants to fight the corruption. Boom. Ukrainians are confused.

Absolutely evident that Mikheil did want to run for elections that was basically where his ambitions were going to, but he did not count well all possible consequences of his "show" in Ukraine. Moreover, because of the fact that he might be only supported by Western part of Ukraine which would not necessarily be enough to win. In addition, he is now remaining a stateless person (while arguing deprivation of Ukrainian citizenship till April 2018) with accusation of criminal activities in both Ukraine and Georgia (which are both obviously fake).

So what is next? The greatest outcome of such a blunder is complete confusion in Ukrainian politics with no predictions for the future. However, in my opinion, because the accusations against Saakashvili are fake (which no doubt they are) the decision of the court will be postponed as long as possible so that he does not have too much space and possibility for action. Poroshenko does not have any alternative option, because if he confirms the accusations against Mikheil the new Maidan is highly possible, which also some of foreign critics were stressing in last several month. Letting him go is too dangerous as Saakashvili is able to fire up the people for further demand of impeachment of Poroshenko. So what is left is gaining time until he comes up with better decision.

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Meanwhile, it seems to me there is another significant blunder here and it's Saakashvili's overestimation of himself. He had a good position of the Governor of Odesa region, he wanted more, he was massively supported, felt he has some power and authority and feels that is more than enough. He of course had to say he won't run for elections to decrease the tension from Poroshenko and the government but he still believes if he has nothing to lose he will go for it and win it. However, Ukraine is much bigger than Georgia. It is much more socially divided than Georgia and, moreover, it is in war.

So to sum up, I classify the case of Saakashvili in Ukraine as a major political blunder and great model of "Irrational Actor". And, clearly, I am looking forward to see if my interpretation of events turns out to be right and what will be the outcomes of the whole story.

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