

Former Georgian President Saakashvili becomes advisor to the Ukrainian government

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Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has appointed former Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili to head the country's Executive Committee for Reforms, an advisory body of the Ukrainian government. In his new role, Saakashvili will be tasked with carrying out the "reform" agenda of Zelensky, which calls for increased deregulation, the most far-reaching privatizations since the restoration of capitalism and overall attacks on the living standards and rights of the working class.

Saakashvili had previously been offered the position of Deputy Prime Minister in April, but Zelensky failed to drum up enough support to get Saakashvili's nomination through parliament, even though Zelensky's Servant of the People party holds an outright majority.

A former State Department fellow, Saakashvili first came to prominence in Georgia as the leader of the NATO-backed and United States-sponsored "Rose Revolution" in 2003. He served as Georgian president twice, from 2004 to 2007 and from 2008 to 2013.

As president, Saakashvili billed himself as a "reformer" who slashed social spending and business regulation while increasing military spending. With full US backing, his government recklessly provoked a war with Russia over the small republics Abkhazia and South Ossetia in 2008 that brought the world to the brink of an open military confrontation between Russia and NATO. Following the war Saakashvili's popularity fell precipitously. He fled to the United States in 2013 after losing the Georgian parliamentary elections in 2012.

The successive Georgian government later tried and convicted Saakashvili in absentia in 2014 for a range of charges including abuse of power and embezzlement of government funds.

After briefly working in the United States as a lecturer at Tufts University, Saakashvili reemerged in Ukraine in 2015 following the US-backed coup of former President Viktor Yanukovich. An outspoken supporter of the right-wing nationalist protests that dispatched Yanukovich and ultimately installed President Petro Poroshenko, Saakashvili was rewarded with the position of Governor of Odessa in 2015.

In Odessa, Saakashvili ultimately fell out with Poroshenko as his attempts to build his own base of power within the country as a "reformer" clashed with the interests of Poroshenko's established local backers. Saakashvili resigned from his Odessa post in 2016 due to what he claimed was "corruption". In 2017, he was stripped of his Ukrainian citizenship by Poroshenko and forced to leave the country.

Throughout his attempts to build up his political support during his tenure in Ukraine, Saakashvili curried favor with the country's far-right xenophobic nationalist forces, including Svoboda and the Azov Battalion, which likewise opposed the Poroshenko government for being insufficiently anti-Russian. During protests he led against the Poroshenko regime in 2017 in Kiev, Saakashvili's supporters openly carried the black-and-red flags of far-right nationalist and Nazi sympathizers and held posters with anti-Semitic slogans on them. When Saakashvili attempted to return to Ukraine in 2018, he was greeted by these same forces at the border, welcoming his return.

While he receives enthusiastic support from both Washington DC and far-right elements within Ukraine, Saakashvili is deeply unpopular. Prior to his banishment from the country in 2017, his Movement of New Forces political party garnered just 2 percent in pre-election polling.

The political return of the vociferously anti-Russian

and cartoonish Saakashvilli to Ukraine is a sign of a profound crisis of the Ukrainian oligarchy which has been rattled by the coronavirus pandemic. In response, the government is trying to double down on its assault on the working class and seeks to strengthen its ties with US imperialism.

The pandemic has effectively nullified Zelensky's previous privatizations and reforms in the eyes of the ruling-class as international capital has rapidly fled the country. The privatization of state-owned enterprises is now expected to earn just \$18 million rather than the budgeted \$624 million due to a suspension of sales during the pandemic.

Zelensky's most prominent "reform" success, a land reform bill that was passed as emergency legislation in the midst of the coronavirus shutdown and that will end a long-standing moratorium on the sale of agricultural land has been viewed as insufficiently beneficial to international finance capital. It will not go into effect until 2021 and limits the sale of land to foreigners until 2024.

With an economy expected to contract by 4.2 percent in 2020 and with an unemployment rate of 9.4 percent, Zelensky has quickly tasked Saakashvilli with negotiating with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) over increased aid. The country is highly dependent on IMF loans. Prior to his appointment, Saakashvilli had attempted to drum up support within the Zelensky administration for a position in an interview with the *Financial Times* by calling for the IMF to "at least double" the amount it loans to the country.

The Zelensky administration is also well-aware that in order to keep IMF money coming into the country, it must continue to implement a right-wing economic agenda of privatization, deregulation, and tax-cutting, all policies Saakashvilli is well-versed in. In a television interview, Saakashvilli stated that his main objective was to "liberate" the Ukrainian economy from too much state regulation.

The right-wing Washington DC-based think-tank Atlantic Council pondered in an article titled "Can Saakashvili rescue Ukraine's reform agenda?" whether Saakashvilli could stop "the Zelensky government's unfolding anti-reform agenda."

The assaults now being prepared on the working class will mean social devastation for broad sections of the

population. Even before the pandemic, 60 percent of the population were living below the poverty line. Now, millions have lost either their jobs or substantial portions of their income. Even though the official number of COVID-19 cases is at 16,325 and rising, the pandemic has already led to a catastrophic situation in hospitals that have been completely ravaged by the restoration of capitalism and decades of austerity.

Saakashvili's appointment is also meant as a clear signal to US imperialism that Ukraine will remain compliant and on the same path of hostility towards Moscow as the previous Poroshenko government. Just two months ago, in March, Zelensky reshuffled the government to bring in a whole series of figures with long-standing and close ties to Washington.

In an interview with Germany's *Deutsche Welle* in April, Saakashvilli stated that he did not support any concessions in the separatist-controlled regions of eastern Ukraine in order to achieve a negotiated peace with Russia and did not believe Zelensky did either.

Zelensky's move last year to negotiate with Germany, France, and Russia, but not with the US, about a settlement of the six-year long conflict in East Ukraine had generated bitter opposition in Washington and substantial sections of the Ukrainian oligarchy. The ongoing civil war has cost the lives over 13,000 and displaced over 730,000. With the support of former President Poroshenko, far-right groups held large protests last fall, threatening to oust Zelensky for "capitulation" if any concessions were made during the "Normandy Format" talks between Russia, Germany, France and Ukraine.



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