

Georgian Lawmakers Shift Powers to Prime Minister

October 03, 2010

The  **Moscow Times**

TBILISI, Georgia — The Georgian parliament on Friday gave tentative approval to a constitutional reform that critics say is designed to let President Mikheil Saakashvili remain a political force even after his current term expires.

The constitutional amendments passed in the second of three required readings would increase the powers of the parliament and the prime minister at the expense of the presidency. Saakashvili's opponents say that would allow him to continue calling the shots after his second presidential term ends in 2013 as long as he moves to the prime minister's seat.

Vladimir Putin used the same tactic in Russia in 2008, becoming a powerful prime minister after serving two terms as president.

Saakashvili denies that the reform is tailored to him, insisting that it was necessary for the country's successful development. Parliament, dominated by Saakashvili loyalists, is expected to give final approval later this month despite opposition protests.

Saakashvili weathered weeks of opposition demonstrations last year that demanded his resignation over his handling of the disastrous 2008 war with Russia, but the splintered opposition groups failed to coordinate and the protests fizzled out.

The new constitution lets the prime minister name Cabinet members and shape policies, turning the president into a mostly ceremonial figure.

"Saakashvili needs to stay in power, because he knows that any democratically elected leadership will raise the issue of his responsibility [for the war]," opposition leader and former parliament speaker Nino Burjanadze said recently. "He wants to create a constitution that would guarantee that he remains in power."

Public reaction to the proposed changes has been mixed. A recent opinion survey had 26 percent of respondents supporting a Saakashvili shift into the prime minister's post, while 32 percent opposed it, 16 percent were indifferent and the rest undecided. The margin of error for the poll conducted by the National Democratic Institute was plus or minus 3 percentage points.

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