

Saakashvili Says He's No Putin

February 01, 2012

The  Moscow Times

WASHINGTON — Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili has dismissed opposition claims that he wants to stay in power as prime minister when his term expires next year, saying his country "can have no Putin."

Saakashvili's opponents charge that the 43-year-old leader, who rode to power in the bloodless Rose Revolution in 2003, wants to stay in power and plans to become prime minister as the head of his United National Movement, which has a large majority in parliament.

"The last thing I want to do is to turn myself into a lame duck by speculating about my own future," Saakashvili told reporters in Washington on Tuesday.

"People ask me, 'Are you going to be Putin?' By definition Georgia can have no Putin. Georgia is not Russia and we are right now doing things that would enable us never to have anything like Putin in Georgia," Saakashvili said, joking that at 43 he was too old for a political career.

Georgia approved constitutional reforms in 2010 that changed its presidential system to a "mixed one" with a more powerful premier and parliament to go into effect in 2013, when

Saakashvili's second term ends.

Saakashvili is currently on a visit to the United States and U.S. President Barack Obama said Monday that they were exploring the possibility of a free trade agreement.

Relations between Georgia and Russia have been strained since Saakashvili ousted Eduard Shevardnadze in 2003 and vowed to move the country out from under Moscow's influence.

The neighbors fought a brief war in August 2008, when Russia crushed an assault by Georgia's U.S.-trained military on the pro-Russian rebel region of South Ossetia.

Since the war, the countries have had no diplomatic relations and Saakashvili said Tuesday that they were "technically" still at war, with Russian troops still occupying parts of Georgia's territory.

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