

Foreign Ministry Official Criticizes Georgian Prison Scandal

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A Russian human rights official has criticized Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili's government a week before a parliamentary election in the former Soviet state, saying that a prison abuse scandal raised questions about its ability to protect its citizens' rights.

Russian leaders have frequently depicted the pro-Western Saakashvili as a dangerous hothead since a five-day war in which Russian forces routed his army in 2008 and set back his hopes of bringing the South Caucasus nation into NATO.

Eager to retain control of Georgia's parliament in the Oct. 1 election, Saakashvili's ruling party is trying to ward off a challenge from a coalition led by billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili, who the president has labelled a Kremlin stooge.

The threat the National Movement faces from Ivanishvili's Georgian Dream coalition has grown since television channels that back Saakashvili's opponents showed footage of torture and rape in a state prison, prompting days of protests.

The election is particularly important for Saakashvili and his allies because Saakashvili is barred by law from seeking a third term in a presidential ballot next year and legislation increasing parliament's power is to take effect after next year's vote.

Russia has avoided taking sides before next week's election, but a statement by the Foreign Ministry's human rights envoy, Konstantin Dolgov, on Monday said that Moscow "is following the dramatic development of the situation in Georgia with concern."

"The shocking footage of torture ... once again makes one wonder about the real capability of the Georgian authorities to guarantee the adherence to human rights and provide for the rule of law," Dolgov said in the statement.

Dolgov also suggested that it raised questions about Georgia's adherence to international anti-torture conventions. He called for a "thorough and unbiased investigation" and urged United Nations and European anti-torture committees to evaluate the situation.

Saakashvili's government says the footage, which showed guards beating, punching and humiliating prisoners, as well as inmates being raped with objects, was recorded by guards who were bribed by unspecified people with political motives.

Ivanishvili has sought to distance himself from Russia by selling Russian banking, real estate and other assets worth hundreds of millions of dollars.

Like Saakashvili, he wants Georgia to join NATO and the European Union. However, he believes that he would be better than Saakashvili at building bridges with Russia, with which diplomatic ties have been frozen since the 2008 war.

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