

Saakashvili Says Scandal Response Shows Georgia Is Better Than Russia

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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UNITED NATIONS — Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili lashed out at Russian criticism of a recent prison abuse scandal in Georgia, saying his government's handling of the case showed it is more democratic than Russia, where nobody "gives a damn" about such crimes.

In the scandal, which broke ahead of Georgia's parliamentary elections next Monday, two television channels supportive of the opposition broadcast video showing the torture and rape of inmates in Tbilisi's main prison.

The head of the prison, his two deputies and several prison guards were arrested, the prisons and interior ministers resigned and Saakashvili asked police to take over prison guard duties while radical reforms of the jail system were planned.

On Monday, Russia said the scandal raised questions about the ability of Saakashvili's government to protect citizens' rights. Russian and Georgian leaders have had a tense

relationship since a five-day war in 2008.

Speaking at the UN General Assembly on Tuesday, Saakashvili angrily rejected the latest criticism, saying Moscow did not like his country's democratic success.

"That's why they want Georgia off the map, because if Georgia survives ... then that's a bad example for all the others [former Soviet states], including the Russian people, from the point of view of the Russian government," Saakashvili said.

"Even the way, how we reacted, to the prison scandal we had recently, in Russia these things happen almost every day ... and nobody gives a damn there about it," he said.

Saakashvili's government has said 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.

"The facts were sickening and our responsibility was clear," Saakashvili said. "Our reaction was swift and we did what democracies do."

Saakashvili also accused Russia of threatening his country by building up its military in Georgia's breakaway South Ossetia region and planning large military exercises on its border on the eve of the election.

Russia recognized South Ossetia and another breakaway region, Abkhazia, as independent nations after the brief war with Georgia in 2008, thwarting Saakashvili's hopes of bringing them into the fold.

"One cannot imagine a more provocative and irresponsible approach than to mobilize military forces during this crucial moment of any nation's democratic life," Saakashvili said.

The president's ruling party is trying to ward off an election challenge from a coalition led by billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili, whom Saakashvili has labeled a Kremlin stooge.

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