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Ukraine Names Georgia's Saakashvili as Governor of Black Sea Hotspot

By The Moscow Times

May 31, 2015

Former Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili in Kiev in 2013

Ukraine's Petro Poroshenko has appointed former Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili to be governor of Ukraine's southern Odessa region, in a surprise move that is certain to raise hackles in Moscow.

President Poroshenko made the announcement on Saturday, standing alongside Saakashvili at a ceremony in Odessa, where he described him as "a great friend of Ukraine." He granted Saakashvili Ukrainian citizenship to facilitate the move.

The security of the Black Sea city of Odessa and its surrounding region has become increasingly worrisome for Ukrainians since a separatist conflict broke out in eastern Ukraine following Russia's annexation of Crimea further along the coast.

Saakashvili replaces Ihor Palytsia, a businessman who was appointed governor in May last

year after more than 40 people, most of them pro-Russian sympathisers, died in a fire in the port city during a confrontation with pro-Western demonstrators.

Poroshenko, who is pursuing a course of European integration to take his country out of the Russian orbit, has appointed several non-Ukrainian nationals to government posts including the finance ministry where U.S.-born Natalia Yaresko has taken over.

But this is the first non Ukrainian by birth to be named to head what is in effect a provincial government.
Saakashvili is widely credited with carrying out radical reforms in Georgia and cracking down on corruption during his term in office from 2004-2013.

But the present Georgian leadership has accused him of abuse of power and has asked for his extradition. He denies any wrongdoing and says charges against him are politically motivated.

Like Poroshenko, Saakashvili, whose country fought a brief war with Russia in August 2008, is a strong proponent of NATO and European Union membership for his native Georgia and for Ukraine.

His appointment drew immediate derision in Moscow. Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev tweeted: "Saakashvili — head of Odessa region. The Chapiteau show goes on. Sad Ukraine ...." The 'chapiteau show' is a Russia way of referring to circus routines.

Poroshenko expressed confidence that Saaksahvili would bring discipline and carry out much-needed reforms in the region. "The people of Odessa should soon feel that their living standards have been raised," he said.

Separately in Ukraine, Kiev's military reported on Sunday that one serviceman had been killed and another wounded in attacks by separatists in the past 24 hours which violated a February ceasefire.

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