

Divisions Revealed as Kremlin Critic Moves to Work for Ukraine Government

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Maria Gaidar

The outcry over prominent Russian Kremlin critic Maria Gaidar's decision to become a deputy to Mikheil Saakashvili, the current head of Ukraine's Odessa region, demonstrates the extent to which the ongoing conflict has divided the two countries, analysts told The Moscow Times on Monday.

Gaidar is the daughter of a former Russian prime minister, while Saakashvili was president of Georgia when it fought a brief but bitter war with Russia in 2008. The former Georgian leader is widely seen as the most vociferous opponent of President Vladimir Putin in the post-Soviet region.

In Russia, the announcement that Gaidar was going to work for Saakashvili prompted accusations of high treason, and her NGO was deprived of a presidential grant. In Ukraine, Gaidar, 32, was pushed to state her position on Russia's annexation of Crimea last year,

and on the ongoing armed conflict in the country's east.

Speaking to journalists during a news conference in Kiev on Monday, Gaidar claimed that her choice to go and work in Ukraine was about values, not nationality.

"This is not just a local conflict between Russia and Ukraine, it is a conflict of values, a civilizational conflict between freedom, democracy, honesty, normal business and Soviet bureaucratic oligarchical gangsterism," said Gaidar, the daughter of Russia's reformist late prime minister Yegor Gaidar, who introduced sweeping market reforms in the country in 1992.

Gaidar has said she wants to retain her Russian citizenship. "In the future I hope that Russia will be a democratic country and it will be possible to go back and work there," she said at the conference, video footage of which was later uploaded to YouTube.

Dual citizenship is prohibited under Ukrainian law. And by law, public officials are required to be Ukrainian citizens.

Gaidar said Saturday in a Facebook post that she plans to receive Ukrainian citizenship, but perhaps anticipating the bureaucratic labyrinth that lies ahead, she added during the press conference Monday that she would be willing to serve on Saakashvili's team in any capacity — including as an adviser or volunteer. In the latter scenarios, she would not necessarily be obligated to give up her Russian passport.

By the time of publication, Gaidar had not responded to requests sent by The Moscow Times asking her to comment on the career move and the ensuing outcry.

Pressure in Russia

Russian lawmakers have rejected the idea that Gaidar will eventually be able to return to Russian politics.

"One has to hate Russia to go work for the Kiev regime — and for whom? For Saakashvili. After this, she has no future in Russian politics," Alexei Pushkov, head of the State Duma's foreign affairs committee, tweeted over the weekend.

In 2008, Russia and Georgia fought a five-day war over its breakaway region of South Ossetia, which together with another breakaway region, Abkhazia, is now recognized by Russia and a handful of other states as an independent nation.

Russia has blamed Saakashvili for initiating the violence, while a European Union investigation found that though Georgian forces did launch an attack, Russia's military response was disproportionate.

Putin and Saakashvili have not traditionally held back from hurling personal insults at one another, and Saakashvili is widely portrayed by the Russian media as an erratic and dangerous U.S. stooge who remains fixated on everything anti-Russian and anti-Putin.

Saakashvili himself described Gaidar's appointment in his Facebook account over the weekend as "an important symbol that there are Russians who are actively resisting

Putin's aggression and are not enemies of Ukraine. Ukraine's success will bring important changes inside of Russia that will end Putin's regime."

In a later Facebook post, Saakashvili — who is wanted by Georgian authorities on suspicion of embezzlement of state funds and abuse of power — said that "the hysterical reaction of the Russian media to Gaidar's appointment suggests that it was the right decision."

In Russia, Social Demand — an NGO headed by Gaidar that advocates for improved social services in Russia — was deprived of a presidential grant it had been given earlier this year.

Russia's Presidential Human Rights Ombudsman Ella Pamfilova told Interfax on Sunday that the grant of nearly 3 million rubles (\$52,700) would be frozen due to Gaidar's decision to become an official in a foreign state.

Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov told Interfax on Monday that he believed Pamfilova's position "would gain the support of the Kremlin."

According to Social Demand's spokeswoman Natalya Malysheva, Gaidar stepped down as the organization's head last week, Interfax reported. Malysheva added that she was confused by Pamfilova's statement, as the NGO had voluntarily and formally refused the presidential grant after Gaidar stepped down.

Vitaly Milonov, an outspoken regional lawmaker in St. Petersburg who has attained international notoriety for his role in spearheading the so-called "gay propaganda law," filed a request with the Investigative Committee, asking them to probe whether Gaidar's career move qualifies as high treason, claiming that working for Saakashvili is on par with working for "Russia's enemy," the BBC's Russian service reported Saturday.

Under Russian law, anyone convicted of high treason can face up to 20 years in prison.

Kirov region Governor Nikita Belykh, under whom Gaidar served as deputy for social policy in 2009–2011, wrote in a LiveJournal blog post Saturday that his former employee's decision was "wrong."

"To go and work for people whose relations toward our country and our people are known to be very negative ... she is pitting herself not only against the authorities, but also against all Russians," said Belykh, a former leader of the now-defunct opposition party Union of Right Forces (SPS).

Pressure in Ukraine

In her new home away from home, Gaidar immediately faced pressure from local reporters to declare her unequivocal support of Kiev amid its current standoff with Moscow.

Activists turned out to the regional administration building in Odessa on Monday demanding that Saakashvili revoke his decision to hire her, Ukrainian news agency UNIAN reported.

Each interview Gaidar has done with Ukrainian media since agreeing to serve under Saakashvili has begun with questions about her position on the ongoing conflict between pro-Russian rebels and Ukrainian forces in the country's turbulent east, and on Russia's

annexation of Crimea.

And thus far she has consistently towed the party line.

She said at a news conference that "Russia is fighting a war with Ukraine."

Gaidar described Russia's annexation of Crimea as "immoral" and "illegal," and called for the peninsula "to be returned to Ukraine." In an interview with Ukrainian channel 112 on Monday, Gaidar claimed that the 2008 Russia-Georgia war was an act of "aggression provoked by Russia."

Between a Rock and a Hard Place

Alexei Makarkin, deputy head of Moscow-based think tank the Center for Political Technologies, said that by moving to Odessa, Gaidar has made the first move in a risky game.

"It is clear that — regardless of their real views — influential people in Russia have had to respond negatively to her decision," said Makarkin in a phone interview.

"Likewise, those people who have endorsed her have no influence at all," he said.

Many Russian politicians and journalists suffering from a lack of opportunities in Russia have gone to Ukraine to advance their careers, Makarkin said.

"But the problem is, these people are also not completely accepted in Ukraine either," he said.

Over the past 15 years, a number of prominent Russian journalists and politicians moved to Ukraine. Following the Orange Revolution — a popular uprising that swept Ukraine in 2003-04 — Boris Nemtsov, an influential Russian opposition politician who was murdered in Moscow in February, went to work as an adviser to Ukraine's then-president Viktor Yushchenko, but he did not move to Kiev on any permanent basis.

In reality, the primary reaction among the Russian elites to Gaidar's decision was "bewilderment," according to Anatoly Gagarin, head of Yekaterinburg-based think tank the Institute of Systemic Political Studies and Humanitarian Projects.

"It is perceived as a lack of political foresight; this person had a chance to join the Russian political elite, but instead opted to work for Saakashvili, who is universally seen as an odious personality," Gagarin said in a phone interview.

"This decision will sever all paths forward for Gaidar in Russia, depriving her of the opportunity to make her own choices in the future," he said.

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