

Georgia's Jailed Ex-Leader Saakashvili Declares, Then Calls Off Hunger Strike

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Georgia's ex-president Mikheil Saakashvili. **IRAKLI GEDENIDZE / EPA / TACC**

Georgia's jailed ex-president Mikheil Saakashvili called off a hunger strike he had announced a few hours earlier Wednesday over the authorities' failure to ensure a video link between the hospital where he is being held and his court hearing.

Saakashvili has been a key figure of politics in the ex-Soviet Caucasus country for two decades and his latest protest put pressure on a long-running standoff with the political rivals who jailed him.

The 54-year-old was transferred to hospital last year after an initial 50-day hunger strike to protest his jailing, which rights groups and allies abroad have said was politically motivated.

Saakashvili's lawyers had requested the deferral of his prison sentence on abuse of office charges, pointing to his poor health.

A court hearing over their demand due earlier Wednesday was postponed after authorities failed to provide a video link between the courtroom and Saakashvili's hospital.

His lawyer Dito Sadzaglishvili told AFP on Wednesday that "Mikheil Saakashvili went on a hunger strike, demanding he be allowed to take part in the court hearings by video link."

Later in the evening Saakashvili called off the hunger strike, after an appeal by a group of European Parliament members.

"I have now received a message from the MEPs categorically asking me to stop the hunger strike at this stage" so as to not give the authorities a pretext to accuse him of self-harm, he said in a written message seen by AFP.

"The MEPs promise to mobilize all diplomatic efforts to ensure the protection of my minimum rights," he added.

Poisoning concerns

The founder of Georgia's main opposition force and president between 2004 and 2013, Saakashvili was convicted in absentia and sentenced to six years in prison in 2018.

The pro-Western reformer was imprisoned in October 2021, days after secretly returning from exile in Ukraine.

Doctors — including those linked to Georgia's rights ombudsperson and his legal team — have warned Saakashvili is suffering from serious neurological conditions.

Rights group Empatia has said Saakashvili was physically and psychologically abused in detention and a doctor linked to Georgia's rights ombudsperson said he had lost around 40 kilograms (88 pounds) in jail.

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"I am sick not because I did not eat forcefully, but because I was poisoned... because I was a victim of improper treatment for many months, which has been confirmed by the world's best experts, including Nobel Prize laureates," Saakashvili said in his message.

In a report released by Saakashvili's legal team, a United States-based toxicologist David Smith said testing had revealed the presence of heavy metals in Saakashvili's body and that related symptoms likely "are the result of heavy metal poisoning" in custody.

The authorities insist that Saakashvili is being given adequate medical care and promised to ensure he takes part in a court hearing next week.

'Political revenge'

Commenting last week on the growing concerns about Saakashvili's health, Prime Minister Garibashvili said: "Our lives are given to God, so I can't really be responsible for anyone's life."

He had earlier said that Saakashvili had been jailed because he refused to quit politics.

The European Union and United States earlier said the government was responsible for providing Saakashvili with proper medical care.

In October, the Council of Europe rights watchdog called for the "release of political prisoners opposed to (Russian President Vladimir) Putin in the Russian Federation and other countries, including Mikheil Saakashvili."

Amnesty International has branded his treatment as "apparent political revenge."

Prior to his return to Georgia, Saakashvili — who is a Ukrainian national — had been appointed by President Volodymyr Zelensky to lead a government agency steering reforms.

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