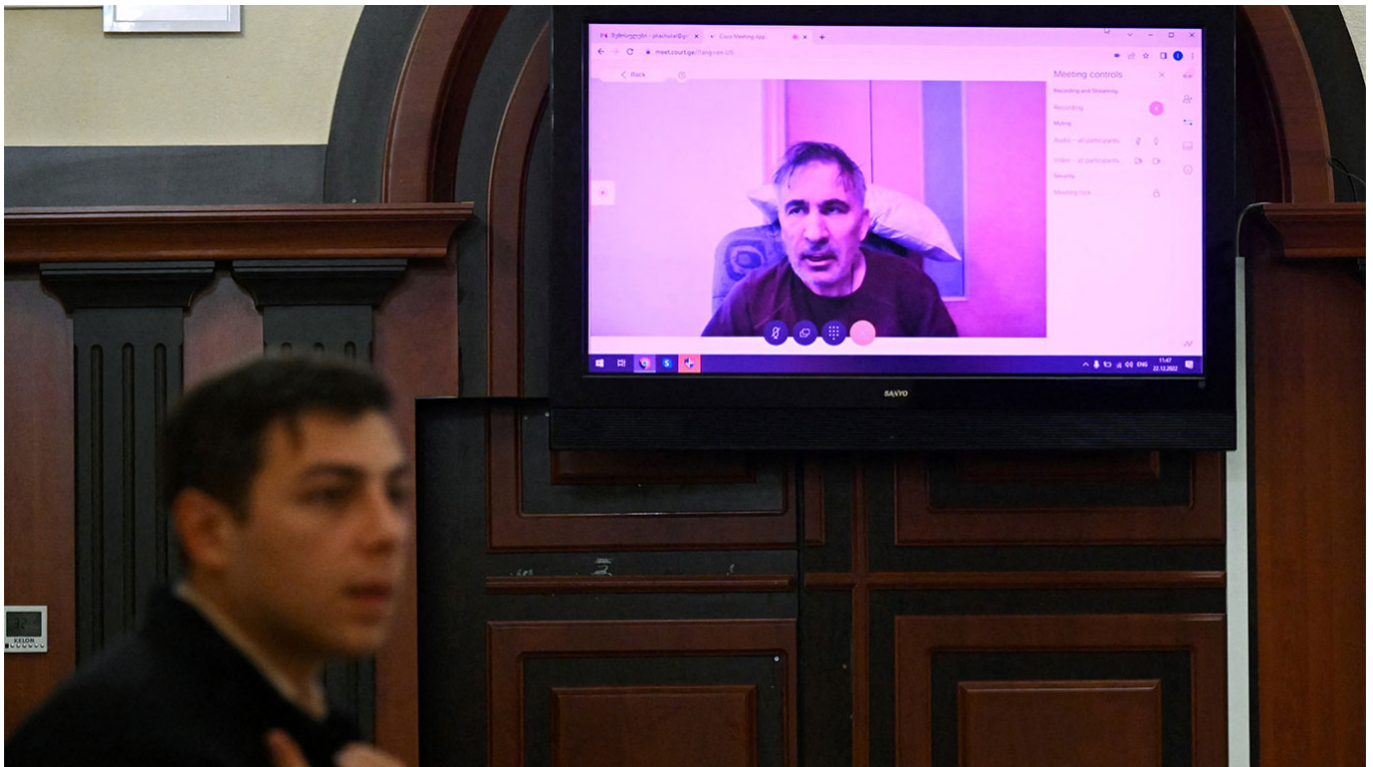


Georgia's Ailing Ex-Leader Saakashvili Appears Gaunt in Court

By [Irakli Metreveli for AFP](#)

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Georgia's ex-President Mikheil Saakashvili appears on a screen via a video link from a clinic during a court hearing in Tbilisi. **Vano Shlamov / AFP**

Georgia's ailing ex-president Mikheil Saakashvili on Thursday looked frail as he appeared by video link at a court that will consider deferring his sentence of abuse of office over poor health.

Gaunt, hollow-cheeked, and his hands trembling, Saakashvili was connected from the hospital by video link. The footage was aired live from court by the independent Pirveli TV station.

A few dozen people gathered in front of the Tbilisi court, carrying banners asking to "Save the President" and "Free Saakashvili."

The 55-year-old was transferred from prison to hospital last year after refusing food for 50

days to protest his jailing, which rights groups say is politically motivated.

"We demand Mikheil Saakashvili is allowed to go abroad for medical treatment as per doctors' recommendation," his lawyer Dito Sadzaglishvili told AFP.

"This is a matter of life and death," he added.

Related article: [Georgia's Jailed Ex-Leader Saakashvili Declares, Then Calls Off Hunger Strike](#)

A group of United States-based doctors who examined Saakashvili in person on his lawyers' request, told AFP he risks death from a litany of serious neurological, gastrointestinal, and orthopedic conditions.

They said his health deterioration was a result of "torture" in custody and he required an immediate transfer to a medical center abroad.

One of the doctors, toxicologist David Smith, also said testing has revealed Saakashvili had been exposed to poisoning by heavy metals while in custody.

'Cruelty must be stopped'

On Tuesday, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky asked the Georgian government "to show mercy" and "transfer Saakashvili to a medical facility in Ukraine, Europe or the United States."

"What is happening to Mikheil now is cruelty. It must be stopped," he said.

Saakashvili was stripped of his Georgian passport after acquiring Ukrainian nationality in 2018.

Zelensky has appointed him to lead a government agency steering reforms.

The European Union and the United States have urged the Georgian government to ensure Saakashvili is provided proper medical treatment and his rights are protected.

Georgian authorities insist Saakashvili is being given adequate medical care.

The founder of Georgia's main opposition force and president between 2004 and 2013, Saakashvili was convicted in absentia for abuse of office 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.

Saakashvili's jailing has sparked the biggest anti-government protests Georgia has seen for decades, with tens of thousands taking to the streets to demand his liberation.

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."

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