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Ukraine: new actors, old manners

Former Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili, whose Ukrainian citizenship and passport were revoked, after his relations with the Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko, has fallen into disgrace, entered in Ukraine after his supporters broke through a cordon of border servicemen. Saakashvili refused the Ukraine President's decision, saying his passport is still valid and last month announced his resolution to enter in Ukraine from Poland with “thousands” of supporters. More than two dozen Ukrainian lawmakers and politicians, including former Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko, travelled to Poland to join him.

After Poroshenko rescinded his Ukrainian citizenship in July, Saakashvili made a theatrical return to Ukraine on the 10th September, when a crowd of supporters broke through police lines on the Ukrainian-Polish border and swept him back into the country illegally. Saakashvili says he wants to return to challenge that decision in court and get back into politics [Kateryna Choursina and Daryna Krasnolutska, Saakashvili Enters Ukraine as Supporters Break Through Border, Bloomberg politics, 10 September 2017].

He was initially refused entry at the Medyka-Shehyni crossing point on the Polish-Ukrainian border. But a crowd of supporters forced their way into Ukraine with Saakashvili, who now risks extradition to his native Georgia. Despite his lack of a Ukrainian passport, he is travelling around the country, determined to be a new leader of the opposition, for challenging the government, that for him has done too little to fight corruption and improve the economy.

Without reform, he says, the government risks failing to hold a country together that has already lost control of territory to Russian-backed separatist in the east. "If Ukraine doesn't change it will continue to break up," he affirmed. “You go to the east and you see whole cities that no longer trade with Russia and are really in a desperate situation. They don't have any prospects and there is no light at the end of the tunnel for them. “If you keep economic growth as it is now, if you keep corruption as it now then Ukraine is going to lose further territories in the east and the south because people will be simply fed up,” he continued [Matthew Day, Ukraine will break up unless government fights corruption, Saakashvili warns, The Telegraph, 24 September 2017].

By crossing illegally into Ukraine, Saakashvili managed to defy Poroshenko's arbitrary decision to strip Saakashvili of his Ukrainian citizenship. The president's move could be viewed as a preventive step that was taken to rule the 2019 votes. Saakashvili has seized the chance to portray himself as a victim of the “Poroshenko regime.” He has become a cause for the opposition to use to rally against Poroshenko, whose own ratings are in decline.

Yulia Tymoshenko, whose “Fatherland” party is currently ahead in the polls, is using the Georgian to widen her lead. The preelection dispute between Poroshenko and Saakashvili and many other political figures shows that the political players continue to conduct the same familiar games. They are unable to win a competition in a civilized manner. The reasons to explain the difficulties to undertake a civil and democratic political debate are manifold.

Political figures act in an environment with no transparent rules, where most participants will play dirty to preserve their own interests. They compete for an electorate that is discouraged by a weak economy, negative news, and a weak political culture.

By trying to prosecute Saakashvili for a minor infraction, the Ukrainian Justice has highlighted all the shortcomings in a system that would need a structural and radical reform. The former President of Georgia has revitalized the opposition and civil society while exposing the flaws of the country’s law enforcement. The risk is that the ruling political class may lose the path to a rigorous process, not just economic, but also democratic, civil and political.

The most pressing issues now go to the heart of the Ukrainian political, judicial, and administrative system. Among them are the unresolved separation of powers between the president, government, and parliament; the electoral system, functioning of the courts, and anti-corruption bodies; and the full implementation and constitutionalization of the decentralization reforms [Judy Dempsey interview, *Judy Asks: Is Ukraine Losing Its Way?*, Carnegie Europe, 13 September 2017]. Ukraine will have to demonstrate its ability to handle political transition if it wants to effectively change its complicated legacy, thus succeeding in affirming a new, truly democratic and free political phase.

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